

DESIRES &
DEVICES



*BY HELEN
SIMPSON*





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DESIRES & DEVICES

OTHER BOOKS BY
HELEN SIMPSON



ACQUITTAL
THE BASELESS FABRIC
CUPS, WANDS & SWORDS

With Clemence Dane
ENTER SIR JOHN



DESIRES
& DEVICES

BY HELEN SIMPSON



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“We have followed too much
the Devices and Desires
of our own Hearts.”

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DESIRES & DEVICES

CHAPTER ONE

T H R O P E

I

CLOUDS, which all day had enfolded the April sun, withdrew just at its setting, so that a light the colour of apricots filled Mrs. Montfort's parlour where she sat working with her niece. The invading light drew out all colour in the room, glorified a bowl of meek-hued cowslips, struck a reflection from the fender, and invested the sober skirts of Mrs. Montfort, and her niece's dark hair, with something of authority; as though this were the robe, this the crown, in a painting of two queens.

Mrs. Montfort, working in silks, disregarded the sun; her niece, who sat by the window, closed her book upon her lap and looked out along the level beams. Against this last brightness the elm-trees showed black still, clotted with rooks' nests which the frail early green could not hide. Over and about the nests, rooks swooped and tumbled, scolded and called, a jolly community whose daily life, though ordered by routine, held uncountable small surprises: more food or less, shot guns, and loud parliaments on foot among the spring grass. The girl, leaning back as far as her chair allowed, envied the rooks as she watched them.

Mrs. Montfort, though busy, was not preoccupied. The creaking of canvas under her needle's pressure, the murmur of the following thread, could not fill her mind to the exclusion of other sounds. She was aware

that for five minutes at least no page had been turned by the window, and that there had been no movement from the chair: the dreaded, the combated idleness was upon the girl, from which it was Mrs. Montfort's duty to rouse her. She inquired, therefore:

"What book, Melian, are you reading?"

The girl stirred guiltily and answered:

"An old book, Aunt."

"I am aware of that. Let me see it."

The girl rose and stood by the work-frame, proffering the book. Mrs. Montfort took it, distastefully.

"Your uncle must have bought this yesterday. I observed that the skirt-pocket of his coat dragged and was dusty. Did you procure it from his study?"

"Yes, Aunt."

Her aunt turned the first leaves with a shrinking forefinger, and read the title.

"Oliver Cromwell's Letters of State."

She turned another page or two, and was about to lay the book aside when a sentence caught her eye, held, and appalled it. She read aloud, incredulous, but doing the author all rhetorical justice:

"Amongst the books published on these subjects, I found several wrote by Milton (a man, if of any religion, of the Romish stamp) in which there appears so much of the stage, and Billingsgate language, that I have little reverence for the man, much less for his Principles."

She ceased, and looked from the book to her niece's face, which, so far from showing any alarm, seemed to Mrs. Montfort to express a kind of approbation.

"What nonsense is this?" asked Mrs. Montfort, largely, turning once more to the title as though to re-

assure herself. "What has this stuff to do with Oliver Cromwell? Or," she continued, "with you?"

"I don't know, Aunt."

"Nor do I know," Mrs. Montfort rejoined, closing the book and laying it aside, "that any good can come of perusing the letters of a regicide. And I am sure that any girl who has been trained to venerate our older poets, and to cull their beauties for her album, must be shocked by a statement such as the one which I have just read."

She closed her eyes, as was her way during the composition of any intricate sentence. Her niece waited until the exordium should have rolled its full course before attempting her own defence, and listened with a dispassionate air as it gathered momentum.

"Reading, as we know, should always be undertaken with a purpose, which is, to make us familiar with the elevated sentiments and judicious phrases of the great; so that should we, in our turn, find ourselves inspired with similar sentiments, the judicious phrases would likewise be ours. What, Melian, is literature?"

Her niece replied without hesitation:

"Innate feeling, modified by the prevailing sentiments of the age, as seen in its best authors."

For this was one of the questions from the domestic catechism which never found her unready, since it was the one most frequently asked. There were others, with answers as long as a collect, such as: "What should be the daily aim of every young unmarried female?" To which the reply was not, as might perhaps have been expected, "To secure a husband as soon and as rich as possible," but a long homily in several clauses, which dwelt first on the avoidance of personal vanity, touched

on the arts, and concluded with an injunction to place all body-linen newly returned from washing at the bottom of the pile. But the definition of literature was a favourite with her aunt, who approved it with a nod and resumed:

"Its best authors—just so. Oliver Cromwell, however, was no author, but a mere ambitious upstart, and it is doubtful, from his behaviour, if he possessed any innate feelings to be modified. Your time, therefore, could hardly have been less well employed, and I might have found many better uses for the ninepence which, as I observe, your uncle paid for this book."

She prepared to rise, removing the coloured skeins from her knee, and laying them in order in her workbox. One skein of black silk she retained, and drew a thread of it through her needle, which she offered to Melian, still standing, still silent, at her side.

"You may, if you wish, continue the grounding of the screen," said Mrs. Montfort. "Tent stitch, and count your squares carefully."

Melian made no movement to accept the needle: her aunt looked at her, surprised.

"Did you hear me?" she inquired.

It was a formal question. Mrs. Montfort spoke to be heard, and when she had spoken, the hearer could be under no misapprehension as to her meaning. She did not wait for an assent, therefore, but continued:

"You have been wilful lately. In a young woman wilfulness is not becoming, though it may be engaging in a child. You are no longer a child."

"You treat me as if I were," the girl answered, suddenly and clearly, "taking my book away, and giving me grounding to do."

"If you wish to do finer work you must take more pains," Mrs. Montfort rejoined, ignoring the question of the book. "You are no longer a child in years, it is true, but you are not much more in accomplishment."

Melian's answer, sulkily uttered, was:

"I wish I could have gone to sea. I wish I'd been Carew."

Mrs. Montfort smiled.

"You are absurd. What use could you be, running about the decks in petticoats? That would have been a very edifying sight."

"I said I wished I'd been Carew."

Mrs. Montfort almost smiled once more. But she checked herself, for this was, in fact, a criticism of omnipotent wisdom to which her niece had given voice. She said, coldly:

"Do not add irreverence to your other fault."

"That's what I think. I can't help what I think."

"Indeed? But you can control your tongue, and you should have enough judgment, and grief enough for your dead brother, not to put into words thoughts which are foolish and blasphemous."

"Aunt Julia! I didn't mean——"

"Perhaps not. That is what comes of speaking rashly. You had a great deal better not have spoken at all."

The girl pressed her lips together. Her aunt proceeded:

"It is not as if your upbringing had been careless. It is not as if you had been left to your father."

"I wish I had. I wish he'd come and take me away from here."

The treacherous tears of her age overcame her. She would not sob; but the effort of control held her throat

and forbade more words, so that her aunt's reproaches might flow without interruption.

"It is quite unfitting at present that you should form part of your father's household. His life in London can be no concern of yours for some time to come, if ever. Meanwhile your uncle and I are willing to undertake your care, and to see that you are not deficient in the woman's sphere of usefulness. We expect no gratitude—fortunately, for I do not think we shall receive it. I had hoped, after training you in the domestic arts, to see you a contented wife; but if this disposition continues, if you are perverse and wilful to this degree, I do not imagine that there will be much hope of an establishment for you. Nothing so soon becomes known in a neighbourhood, and nothing is so repellent."

Melian answered, having a momentary respite:

"I don't want to marry anyone."

"There," said Mrs. Montfort, coldly, "you show at last some trace of right feeling. Of course you do not want to marry; no gentleman as yet has asked you. You should not form expectations, but you should be prepared; your heart should be in readiness for the offer when it comes. Do not deceive yourself. Reading, needlework, personal attractions—these are no more than preparations for a husband and an establishment, and ornaments when both are attained; they can never be substitutes."

Melian, who feared the thought of marriage with her whole heart, became still as a stone. Even her tears were quenched by her fear of this destiny. It was bondage, mysterious and disquieting, yet the only way for her to freedom; something to which she must at last submit, as to death. In despair, she broke out:

"I'll write to Papa. I'll ask him to take me away."

"Your father is too much engaged, I am thankful to say, to pay any attention to such a request."

"He'll let me live with him if I ask. He let Carew go to sea."

"Carew chose an honourable profession in which your father has some interest. What you ask is ridiculous."

"Why is it ridiculous for a girl to live in her own father's house?"

"I prefer not to discuss this matter with you. It is unsuitable."

"Why? Why is it unsuitable?"

The sun withdrew, and with its light all gaiety was withdrawn from Mrs. Montfort's parlour. Colour departed from the carpet, the silks, Melian's dark hair, and the parlour seemed at last what it was in truth, a small room, damp and prim, in which the positions of the chairs were never changed from one season to another. With sobs rising once more in her throat the girl burst out:

"Am I to stay here forever, then, in this place?"

Mrs. Montfort did not answer at once. She closed the lid of her workbox carefully and spread a length of muslin over her métier before she rose to confront her niece. This manœuvre, this looming, had its effect on Melian, as on troublesome servants and drunken villagers; even on other too presumptuous wives of clergymen. Mrs. Montfort was tall, she was formidable in her serenity, and Melian had lived for years under her rule. The girl had no reasonable complaint to make, no injury to resent. She knew herself to be well-fed, clothed, and treated; and if she knew also that she was not happy, there was no cause on which she could lay her finger.

She could not defy or explain. She could only cry out, in a voice too loud for the parlour:

"I hate it. I hate it. Why must I stay here?"

Calmly her aunt replied:

"Go to your room, and I will send Alice to you with some lavender drops. She shall bring you up your supper. You need not come down again this evening."

Childishly, moving away in tears, Melian murmured:

"I don't want any supper."

"Just as you choose," said her aunt. "But you will not improve matters by starving yourself. A bowl of soup, or—we are to have chicken patties this evening, I believe. Alice shall take you one of those, with a little toast."

Melian turned, goaded.

"No!" she answered, loudly as before. "I don't want chicken patties. Or lavender drops. Nothing! I want to be alone. I want to be left alone——"

She blundered from the room, and upstairs: her aunt remained, making no attempt to follow or console. Though she knew that from this quarter no interruption would come, Melian turned the key of her bedroom door before she folded back the counterpane and lay down to cry at her ease. Obedient, the tears came flooding; they shook her, they trickled to her pillow, in a manner that was a gratifying proof of her grief's reality. For a time she had no need to do more than abandon herself; then came a pause, almost a cessation, when, but for encouragement, the sobs would have died down. She persevered, however, and was rewarded by another five minutes' anguish, which in its turn came to an end, and was succeeded by vengeful imaginings. She saw herself rescued, borne off by her father in a carriage, from whose window she leaned to wave farewell to a contrite

aunt. She saw herself in London, saving the King's life at the risk of her own from some assassin's hand: foremost in the crowd that gathered to cheer her gallantry stood Aunt Julia, admiring, meek. She saw herself—reluctantly, and solely for purposes of revenge—as the wife of a Bishop, patronising Aunt Julia, keeping Aunt Julia subject with the merest hint of a word to his Lordship that should tilt, this way or that, the scales of preferment. Her imagination bore hardly upon Aunt Julia, ringing the changes of her humiliation for almost an hour; thus Melian, lying tired yet at ease on her bed, with dusk creeping up outside her windows, and the bird-sounds failing.

II

Before it was quite dark she slept, childishly calm. No memory of tears came to interrupt the gentle rhythm of her breath. Silently the hours crept by, and the little watch tucked in at her waist recorded them: she slept on. Outside the open window, whose curtains had not been pulled to hide the sky, night came into its own. Stars emerged, shone, and were obscured by clouds, that drifted at the bidding of a wind unfelt by trees and grasses. Sounds became rarer: a dog, roused by some unfamiliar footstep, cried in the village, over the invisible garden an owl hooted. Inside the house, steps ascended the stairs. Shadows, as the candles passed, sloped backwards, lengthened, and were replaced by other shadows. Doors were opened and finally closed. In the upper rooms subdued movement continued for a time; then this too ceased, no thin line of light showed beneath any door: only a nightlight, wavering, ghostly, kept watch on the deserted landing.

It was after midnight when Melian woke, cramped, and aware of cold. She lay for a time, puzzled to account for her stiffness and the chill about her ankles: remembered, and slipped from the bed to light her candle. Her mirror showed a sorry figure. No traces remained of the recent grief; her eyes were bright, not hollow; one cheek, the cheek on which she had lain, was flushed, and her hair, escaped from its combs and pins, hung askew on her head. Untidiness itself did not vex her, but she felt that such prodigal and reckless misery should have conferred nobility of aspect. Shivering, she began to take down her hair, letting the pins clatter on to their tray, eager to be in bed and protected from the nipping air. The twenty strokes of the brush which her aunt imposed nightly were omitted. Her clothes were not folded as she shed them, but took their chance on the floor or across a chair. Safe in her nightgown at last, she hurried through a prayer, whose sense might have been:

“Our Father, which art in heaven, my feet are so cold, how long summer takes to come, hallowed be Thy name. Dear God, please let me be happy, let things happen so that I don’t stay here, don’t let me have to get married. I don’t understand about it, I’m frightened—dear Lord, bless my father, and Uncle Simon and Aunt Julia. I will try to be good, but don’t let me stay here, I don’t want to stay here. Dear Lord, please find some way out of it so that I don’t have to be here always, and so that I don’t have to be married to anyone. Let me be happy, dear Lord, please, and Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven——”

She finished the prayer with her lips, in haste, and scrambled into bed, pulling the cold sheets high, rubbing

one foot against the other for warmth. Soon the flow of her blood quickened; but with the increased comfort came wakefulness; the cold air entered unchecked, the stars were insistent, and she was hungry. Her mind as she lay waking was a confusion of restless thought, where rebellions, chicken patties, the go and come of the stars, and curiosity regarding her father succeeded each other without reason. She tried to tell herself her nightly story, or rather, to continue the endless romantic tale of her own adventures as a young man, a sailor; even this refuge failed, and her imagination, unbidden, enacted for her a hateful little scene. She was at a ball, seated, hoping soon to have the credit of a partner. A young man standing near surveyed her, and thinking himself unheard, asked another gentleman:

“Who is that girl?”

“Miss Melian Forster, I believe,” his friend answered. “Should you like to know her, to ask her to stand up?”

And the young man answered, laughing and looking away:

“What a number of bones she has! They are necessary supports, I daresay, and all very well for men, and such ugly strong creatures, but ladies do very well without them, in my opinion. No, no; I do not think I care to stand up with Miss Forster.”

And this scene, though she forbade it, and summoned despairingly the smoke of the cannon, her mind acted and acted again, obliging her to look on. It was not her vanity that was attacked. She cared nothing for round arms and snowy skin in themselves, lures designed to catch masculine attention: she had no wish to catch masculine attention, feared it, indeed, of all things. But she had the common predilection for not appearing

a fool, and physical perfections defended their possessor against all ridicule.

On went her thoughts, mocking her, and the little watch under her pillow kept pace with them. The house was entirely still, no irrelevant sound distracted her attention from the tormentor. She sat up in bed, hugging her knees, staring into the darkness with all the forlorn abandonment of seventeen. Escape lay no way, it seemed. What, must she forever sit in the same rigid parlour doing woolwork, answering questions? She, whose mother had been born in Sicily, whose brother had died at sea. But what refuge offered? One only, her father, the unknown, unsuitable father in London. In a moment she was out of bed, running lightly across the cold floor to her little writing-desk of green leather that stood on the chest of drawers, running back with it, and huddling under the bedclothes once more, the desk on her knees. She chose from it a plain piece of paper, and a pencil; then, without thought, other than the longing for escape, began:—

My dear Papa, I write to you because I am unhappy. I do not like being here. I have nothing to do, for I am not good at needlework, and cannot draw, for I have no eye for perspective. There is nothing for me to do in the house, my aunt will not let me help her. Please, my dear papa, let me come and be with you in London. I should like it of all things. If I may come I will do my very best to please you, as soon as I know what you prefer. With kind regards for your health—

But when she read it over it would not do. Even by candlelight, at half-past one in the morning, that hour

and setting which so easily incline writers to a favourable view of their productions, it would not do. It was the letter of a child, written in a pet—

Miss Jenny and Polly had each a new dolly
With rosy-red cheeks and blue eyes;
The only thing was, they quarrelled because
The dolls were of different size—

Just as absurd seemed the letter. She crossed out the writing, turned over the sheet, and bestowing the bed-clothes with more dignity about her, began once more:

My dearest papa,—It will surprise you to receive a communication from me, not enclosed in one from my aunt, but I have a proposal to make which concerns me alone, and I had rather she knew nothing of it until you have reached a decision. I am now seventeen, as you perhaps remember. I have grown fast, but am very strong, and not at all sickly. I fear I have not many accomplishments, but I have assisted my aunt, and I believe that I understand the management of an establishment with two maids and a man. I have a recipe book, and a notebook in which I write down any household hints that I hear in conversation.

My dear papa, should you care for me to undertake the management of your house in London? I do not know the ways to which you are accustomed, but I could soon learn, and should do my utmost to please you. I do not require much gaiety, indeed, I do not care for it. What I most wish is to take my place as your daughter, and to be of use. I hope that this may be possible without inconveniencing you.

She was satisfied with this attempt, which, it seemed to her, had dignity. The question remained of the man-

ner of her letter's despatch. She shrank from the diplomacy, the shifts, which would be necessary to send it simply by means of fourpence paid at the post-office, which she could hardly visit unaccompanied. The customary letter to her father was enclosed in a franked sheet from her uncle's writing-table, in whose right-hand drawer lay a bundle of such franks, one of the many advantages attached to the patronage of one who sat in the House of Commons: these Melian coveted, and she revolved plans for obtaining possession, all of which, try as she would, had the unmistakable appearance of stealing. She could not ask for one outright, unless she explained her letter. If she explained, the letter would be asked for, read, and gently but definitely—for where was its reason? How mad was such a step, how unwarrantable!—put aside, withheld. Stricter supervision would follow, that way of escape would be closed; there would be nothing left but the hope, vague, comfortless, that something would happen to rescue her; and the knowledge, certain, despairing, that nothing could happen in that lost corner of the world.

"I'll steal, then," said Melian, aloud, so that her will might be compelled to assent. "I'll steal, I'll steal, I'll steal!"

Her will resigned itself; and if she hesitated to get out of bed it was mere physical apprehension of the cold that checked her, a repugnance soon overcome. She put the bedclothes aside and was out of bed in one movement; found her stockings, drew them on, and another pair over them, so that she might dispense with slippers and go more silently: donned a spencer, and her bedroom gown, took her letter: then opened her door and stepped out upon the landing.

III

The small familiar space through which she had passed ten times a day for ten years suddenly revealed itself to her eyes for the first time: strange, for all its everyday carpet and woodwork, as the flagged chamber where Lady Macbeth walked by night. Melian had seen shadows stalk on the wall before, and had heard the groan of the stairs, two steps below the turn, as often. Both were portents now, and as she went stealthily down she had the illusion of being unreal, a personage in a tale.

At the foot of the stairs, halting to listen, her ear caught a sound. She held herself motionless, trying to discover, across the beating of her heart, from which direction it came. It was repeated, but became no more comprehensible; it was neither a snore, nor an opening door, nor a step. One thing was certain, it did not come from the room where her uncle and aunt slept, and so was not greatly to be feared. An uncle, an aunt, these were reality: the sight of either, peering from above in a nightcap, would have dispelled irrevocably both courage and dream, and brought her in an instant to the unready schoolgirl. But miscreants in that house, being no more credible than her midnight self, could not alarm her. She disregarded, therefore, the formless noise, which seemed to proceed from the attic where Alice slept alone, and passing through the hall, turned down the short passage which led to her uncle's study.

This passage was secured against household interruptions by an intermediate wheezing door covered with green baize, whose hinges Mrs. Montfort had that morning, providentially, caused to be mellowed by

means of a feather dipped in olive oil. It yielded ungrudgingly. Melian passed into a lobby populous with hanging coats, capes and gardening baskets, to which the servants' staircase descended, close beside the study door. She was safe, until in another heartbeat she remembered Frank.

Frank was the manservant, who slept in a little room off the pantry; should sleep, at this hour, but for all that might be waking. Frank was intrepid; he would think nothing of coming forth with a poker to investigate steps and softly-shutting doors in the lobby; yet he worked hard all day, and might well sleep soundly. She listened. No snoring came from his room. The black china handle of her uncle's door was no more than three feet from her hand, and it represented the halfway goal, as the painted marguerites and roses on her own inner door-knob stood for accomplishment. She turned it, and with precaution entered.

This book-filled room was homely by candlelight. She was used to be despatched to it after supper with enquiries concerning hot drinks, and injunctions from her aunt not to disturb, by lingering, the sermon then in process of writing. Here she would find her Uncle Simon, with Bible and foolscap before him, pulling at his lips while he considered the local moral to be drawn from Old Testament exploits. During these innocent errands, as now on her mission of thieving, the brown leather of the books welcomed her, and gave back the light of the candle softly, as did the table's polished surface, and the iron wreaths and torches of the grate. Thus at home, Melian no longer felt guilty. Indeed, spying crumbs among the papers, she shook her head at the thought of her uncle, who must have purloined

sponge-cake from the dining-room unknown to his wife: Mrs. Montfort discouraged such snacks, and would often enlarge upon the folly of those who could not refrain from overloading the digestion, more especially at night. Whatever discomfort the looted slice might have caused Mr. Montfort, its remains did much to encourage his niece, who, comparing its value with that of a frank, felt herself justified, since the letter cost nothing, while eggs, owing to the late spring, were still at winter prices.

Thus fortified in ill-doing by such encouragement as a dozen crumbs could afford, she sat down, and tested the drawer where her spoils lay. It resisted. In some moment of prudence, surely unconscious, her uncle had locked it. But this Melian had foreseen. She abandoned it, and pulled forward instead the middle drawer; there, as her knowledge of Mr. Montfort's habits had permitted her to guess, lay all his keys, unprotected, save that they were tied together by a tape. These, one after another, she tried upon the locked drawer, until the fourth key turned easily, and the bundle of papers, stamped with red, was under her fingers. She took one of the sheets: but reflecting that other emergencies might arise, and bearing in mind the high price of those eggs which had composed the stolen cake, took out two more, and closed the drawer upon the rest. Then, with the pencil copy of her letter spread before her, and the solitary candle drawn close, she began to transcribe

It was done soon, and creditably. No blots disfigured it, neither hurry nor guilt was apparent in the neatly sloping lines which filled the sheet. She re-read, and folded it. Wax was in the standish, and an opportune button which might serve for seal. The superscription followed:—

*To Horatio Forster, Esquire,
109, Mecklenburg Square, 109
London.*

Horatio Forster, Esquire.

With her uncle's penknife she tidied the single spot of wax that she had let fall on the candlestick: the quill was replaced, the ink covered. No trace of crime remained, save the *corpus delicti* itself, and this, now that she had leisure to think of the matter, presented the same difficulties of disposal which may incommode the possessors of a veritable body. She put the problem aside for consideration in bed, and with a pin secured all the papers to the lining of her gown. Safe, and a trifle vainglorious, she took up the candlestick and ventured once more into the lobby, but almost at once stood still, bewildered by the behaviour of the shadows. They should have streamed behind her, yet while she stood they swerved, doubled, melted together and then fell apart, obeying some movement not her own. She waited, sick with fright, not daring to look up at the stairs, down which someone was creaking. She heard the steps pause. The shadows stopped wheeling, halted, quivered. A man's voice said, low but harshly:

"Christ Almighty! Who's there?"

At the sound she stepped forward, her fear lifting, for it was only Frank. He stood there, one hand curved about the flame, his face peering above it, strained, afraid. He wore his greatcoat buttoned over a shirt; his feet and legs were bare. As she moved he knew her, and spoke, in the same low voice, her name.

"Miss Melian! What——?"

She did not answer, being unable to summon anything

to say. She kept her eyes fixed on him steadily, and it seemed to her that he did not care to meet them. He looked down instead at the wick of his candle, and snuffed it with his fingers; but the flame trembled still. He spoke again:

"Miss Melian, what brings you here? I thought I heard something not right. I thought I'd warn the master——"

Now, in a subdued panic, she answered with a question:

"Did you wake my uncle?"

"Why, no, miss," the man stammered. "There was nothing. Seems I was mistaken. The cat got shut in, most like. I wouldn't go for to wake master without there was reason. He'd have a word to say. So I left be, and came down again."

To her astonishment she saw that he was sweating. His forehead and upper lip had grown shiny, in spite of the cold. He must have thought her a ghost. She took breath, and gave her explanation with fair composure.

"I came to the study for something I had left there—a book——" Her hands were empty; this statement disproved itself for any person who had eyes; but Frank, for the moment, had none. She went on:

"You understand, there need be no mention of this to Mrs. Montfort. I am sure you would not wish her to be distressed."

The man's face lost its tension. He looked up at Melian with the swift enquiring glance of a guilty dog that hopes to escape punishment.

"Do you understand?" she insisted, for it was necessary that Frank should be silent. Swiftly the thought came that she might have to bribe him; swiftly, too,

the answering thought, that she had no money, save a very few shillings. He was speaking.

"Thank you, Miss Melian. I wouldn't like it, as you say, for the mistress to think——You see, there was nothing wrong. I was wakeful——"

He broke off, and repeated:

"Thank you, Miss Melian. Thank you, miss."

She perceived that for some reason he had no intention of threatening her. He was as much in dread as she. It was mysterious, but grateful. She was secure. There was no occasion for more talk, or further courage, and with that knowledge she felt the deadly weakness assail her knees. Abruptly she bade him good-night, and made her way through the baize door, up the stairs, while her strength persisted. Caution, and the necessary slowness, tried her almost to breaking-point; with each step strength ebbed from her, so that when at last she felt the knob of her door in her hand she could hardly turn it, even to find sanctuary.

The errand was done. She lay on her bed, giving her heart its needed quiet, while she rated herself, and argued against her own distress. Frank would not tell. He might have a word for the maids, how he had seen Miss Melian like a ghost in the lobby, long after midnight. What matter? It would be a strange thing if the maids should confide in Mrs. Montfort, who had theories, endorsed by the Catechism, regarding the duty of servants, and their station in life. Still her heart thudded against her side, thinking of Frank, with the beads of sweat starting above his mouth, and his voice sunk to that night whisper. His room was on the ground floor; yet he had surprised her from the stairs, instead of emerging from the door beside the pantry. He had gone,

he said, to rouse her uncle. What had alarmed him? For she had made no sound in her descent, and must have heard him had he come from his room while she was in the study. Moreover, he had not roused her uncle, after all. Could he have heard that sound from the attic which had halted her at the foot of the staircase in the hall? So very faint a sound?

The thing was a tangle. Her drowsy brain abandoned it; and as the heart beats slackened she felt herself drifting out of consciousness, calmly as though the night had held nothing more momentous than a dream or two. Just before she reached the final peace came a disturbing vision of Frank's face as it had looked before he recognised her; beneath the fear in the eyes was something that was sleepy, as though full-fed. She could not name this strange look, hated it without knowing why; shuddered, ceased to remember it, sighed, and was asleep at last.

IV

Melian awoke to sunlight with a feeling of well-being and lightness to which the absence of supper the night before might have contributed. As she dressed she was aware of something lacking, and sought for it while she arranged her hair and tied her petticoats; but she was breakfasting with appetite before she remembered that what had forsaken her was the sense of wrong. She drank her tea, however, and finished her toast, reflecting the while upon the inconstancy of emotions, the gusty blowing to and fro of passions, the impossibility of maintaining life at a tragic level in a world where such snares as sunshine and lightly-boiled eggs lay in wait for the constant mind.

In her accustomed place at the table's foot sat her aunt, unaware of the humiliations which she had endured at Melian's bidding during the night hours, large, calm, and oblivious of rebellion. Her face, washed with soap and cold water, shone, as was its morning wont. Mrs. Montfort was cheerful at breakfast, rejoicing, as she had once told her niece, at the prospect of another day to be usefully, or at worst harmlessly, filled. She ate plentifully as a duty, putting on strength for the day, setting up a buckler of ham and eggs between her willing spirit and the weaknesses of the flesh. Cheerful, large, and a trifle greedy, Mrs. Montfort undoubtedly was; tyrannical she was, but had not the appearance of it; indeed, she would have made a very creditable, welcoming, dragooning hostess of a posting-house, if her faultless diction could have been stripped away, not to terrify travellers. Again Melian was dismayed by the obstinate refusal of things as they are to don the trappings suitable to things as they should be. Impossible to summon again the overnight atmosphere of misery and injustice; sun, food, shining silver, and her aunt's morning face conspired against her. Drama escaped from these, they could not hold it, and the best Melian could do to maintain her sense of injury was to refuse further toast, a refusal robbed of its full significance by the hearty meal which had gone before; though here she was more fortunate than she might have hoped in causing her uncle some concern.

"Melian," said he, "my dear child, you're not eating."

Melian replied with truth, but in a tone which invited disbelief, that she had eaten. Her uncle surveyed her, and resumed:

"Food is necessary for us all, but more particularly for young ladies. It preserves the bloom. You should try to eat well—you, a country lass. Leave these unhealthy foibles of starvation and pallor to ladies in London."

"Melian eats well enough," said her aunt, scanning her, "but she is too thin. She has no figure such as would secure her attention in a large gathering. There may be balls when Sir Hilary returns, and I am at a loss to conceive what we are to do with her unless she develops in the meanwhile. There are ways of adjusting the figure itself; but arms, and hollows at the base of the throat, are incorrigible by artifice."

"These," said Mr. Montfort, "are ladies' secrets."

And he turned away all further revelations with a cough. His wife left the topic of Melian's shortcomings to take up a more important matter.

"You know that we take dinner with the Finns to-day?"

"The Finns?" Mr. Montfort inquired, as though to him the name represented only barbarians clad in fur eating blubber by an icy shore. His wife continued as though he had not spoken:

"I told you of it. Their nephew is expected, who has newly become secretary to Sir Hilary. It is to be quite an impromptu affair, no ceremony, as Mrs. Finn says. I do not know that this is a recommendation, but evidently the engagement has escaped your mind."

Mr. Montfort shook his head, well knowing how engagements, names, faces, everything except dates and texts centuries old, did slip through the wide mesh of his memory.

"It was agreed that although you could not accept,

by reason of your appointment with the Admiral, you should drive us to Pliny, and set us down at the Finns' before proceeding."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Montfort, with the air of one hearing an interesting story for the first time. "But I have had my little talk with the Admiral."

"When?" Mrs. Montfort challenged.

"Yesterday, yesterday," he assured her.

"I understood that your excursion to Pliny yesterday had to do with the meeting of antiquaries."

"You misunderstood, my love. Both engagements were for the same day. The Admiral was most affable. Indeed, I borrowed a book of him, which, by the way, I cannot find this morning——"

"Do you not, then, dine there to-day?"

"I think not," said Mr. Montfort, but as one willing to defer to stronger judgment. "I think not. Even the Admiral's affability would not extend to an invitation on two consecutive days."

Mrs. Montfort leant back in her chair as a wave retreats to gather volume and strength. Melian knew this pause, and waited for the rolling thunder of the sentences which should follow. Mr. Montfort knew it, too, and rose; but the wave was upon him before he could make good his escape.

"To those unacquainted with the inscrutable workings of Providence," the exhortation began, "it would at first glance appear improbable that our two existences, so dissimilar in every respect, should ever have been joined. Those, on the other hand, who without presumption endeavour to find evidences of paternal wisdom in the Divine plan, must be struck by the complementary nature of such an union."

She drew breath.

"Certainly, my dear," Mr. Montfort agreed. "I know it very well. I have no regrets. You have tempered the wind often, often——"

He sighed, and with caution continued his progress to the door. But Mrs. Montfort had more to say.

"A most intolerable bungle. You informed me that your interview was for Thursday——"

"The fifteenth, the fifteenth of the month," he protested.

"Yesterday," Mrs. Montfort answered, "was the thirteenth."

Mr. Montfort plucked up a little courage.

"The italic numerals three and five are easily to be mistaken for each other. The Roman system permitted no such confusion."

"It is impossible, at the last moment, for you to accompany us. An unexpected guest—and Mrs. Finn has lately changed her servants. There will be a new maid waiting at table, who is flurried enough, I dare say, at this moment. You cannot go."

"My dear, I don't wish it. I shall do very well here, with a chop."

"That is easy to say. But as I supposed that we should be absent from home, I took care to have no unnecessary food in the house. You must make shift with a share of the servants' pudding and broth."

"As you please, my love. I can eat, or do without."

Melian smiled towards her plate, thinking of the crumbs on his writing-table.

"You cannot do without. It is most unhealthy to neglect regular meals. I have done my best for twenty years to instil beneficial habits."

"I shall do very well, very well indeed, with a little broth."

"It is not enough for you. You are not robust. But I am not to blame. I endeavour to look forward, and not infrequently I pray for guidance in housekeeping; but I have not been endowed with the gift of prophecy. I cannot tell when food will be required contrary to all expectation."

"You will excuse me, Julia. I have that matter of the fuel accounts to see to."

His wife's silence permitted him to approach the door; but on the threshold, of his own accord, he paused.

"May I ask," said Mr. Montfort, standing his ground in the doorway, "where I shall find the book I spoke of? It was a book dealing with the statecraft of Oliver Cromwell. It has disappeared from my table, put away for safety, no doubt."

"You shall have it immediately," Mrs. Montfort replied.

Her husband still lingered.

"I cannot proceed with the accounts at once. George Irons, who should soon be here, may have something further to add. In the meanwhile——"

"When the book is found, it shall be brought to you," said Mrs. Montfort finally.

He withdrew, downcast, and they could hear how his footsteps lagged through the hall towards the front door. He was making for the garden. As the front door closed behind him, Mrs. Montfort said to Melian, sharply:

"Ring that bell."

Melian obeyed, but the bell was not immediately

answered. While she waited, stately and stiff-backed, Mrs. Montfort's hand played unwonted scales and trills on the table-cloth; to Melian's surprise, for this was the nearest approach to agitation she had ever witnessed in her aunt. At length Alice appeared, apprehensive lest she should be scolded for delay; a state of mind which Mrs. Montfort's preamble did not tend to soothe.

"Alice," said Mrs. Montfort, "I have to speak to you about a serious matter——"

Melian, watching idly, saw the maid's eyes flicker and widen.

"—in which you are concerned. I trust that things are not as I fear."

Alarm, unmistakable, came now into Alice's face. She looked swiftly downwards, at her own body, it seemed, and did not lift her eyes again. Mrs. Montfort came to the point with a question.

"Where is that book?"

Alice's face grew bewildered and stupid. This was not the question she had been expecting. She could not answer all at once; the current of her thought could not so easily change.

"That book," Mrs. Montfort repeated, tapping again with her fingers, "which I gave you last night, which I said might be made into spills——"

The trouble cleared on a sudden altogether from Alice's face.

"We never touched it, ma'am, Marian nor me. Only——"

"Well?" said Mrs. Montfort, fearing disaster, the very obedience on which she had so often insisted; and repeated the question impatiently, "Well?"

But Alice was ready.

"Frank, ma'am, seeing it lying there, and hearing tell how there was to be spills made of it, and him wanting to shave—there's two pages gone at the back, ma'am, what he took to wipe his razor. Plain pages, ma'am. He didn't like to tear the printing."

After a moment's silent thanksgiving, Mrs. Montfort gave out the words of dismissal.

"That will do. I myself will speak to Frank."

To Melian, when they were alone again, she said: "Spills! I tremble to think of it!"

It was true. She was trembling. She disapproved of the use of figurative language to describe events of every day. Melian could not withhold admiration for her aunt's supreme duplicity; for when, with her husband's question, came the revelation of the book's ownership, no quiver had betrayed the distress which later her tapping fingers had revealed. No watcher could have told from her demeanour that she had been within an ace of committing an action which touched very nearly the two crimes of theft and arson. She went on:

"But there is no great harm done. I can pare these edges and replace the paper exactly."

"I'll do it, Aunt," Melian volunteered.

"My dear child, your fingers are not sufficiently neat. You are impatient. This matter needs care. It is the Admiral's book, let us remember. Clumsiness will not do."

That snapped the frail temporary bond. Melian liked handling books. She would have been glad to sit down with scissors and warm glue to restore the missing pages. But it was true that she was clumsy; her aunt was right. There would have been uneven edges, tiny

smears of glue left visible. She knew this in her heart, but it was maddening that her aunt should recognise it, too, and state it so clearly.

"I shall not have leisure this morning," Mrs. Montfort went on, "we must prepare for our social duties. You will wear your India muslin, if it is fresh."

"It has a tear at the gathers. I'd rather put on the spotted."

"It is less suitable. There will be gentlemen at Mrs. Finn's—one at least, her nephew. You must look your best. Come here."

Relentless, she took Melian's face in her two hands and turned it to the light, making a careful survey. Melian stood passively, humiliated and raging. After a very few seconds she was released.

"Senna!" said Mrs. Montfort. No other word was needed; this one represented the diagnosis and her decision: she had nothing to add to it.

"I don't want it," Melian broke out, chiding herself inwardly, resolving to reconquer dignity, failing, hearing her protests become more and more childish.

"I hate senna."

"It clears the blood."

"My blood doesn't need clearing."

"My dear, if that were so, you would not look sallow. The pods shall be put to soak now, and you may take the water to-night. Meanwhile, go and attend to your dress. How can it have become torn?"

Unassailable in righteousness, Mrs. Montfort left the room. Melian remained, for no purpose, it seemed, but to pull a cowslip from the bowl and shred it between her finger and thumb, angrily, thinking of her letter and its chances. She was determined, now, that

it should be sent. But how, but how? And when it came to her father's hands, what then? He might not answer, nor want her. Tears rose to her eyes and overflowed, transforming the garden to a scene viewed mistily and distorted in a crystal. Somewhere from the neighbourhood of the kitchen she heard her aunt calling. At once she blew her nose, and, dreading senna, fled to her room upstairs, where the care of the India muslin might serve as pretext for disregarding that insistent voice. She took it down from its hanging place, and shook it out to see how serious was the rent at the gathers; it was not serious at all, the merest frivolous parting of two or three stitches, enough to occupy her fingers for three minutes at most, yet enough to quiet her conscience in that she had told her aunt no lie. She found needle and thread, but not the thimble which some Median rule had decreed that she must wear while sewing. It was downstairs in her workbox. To the parlour Melian knew that she should now resort, carrying her dress with care, shrouded in a clean towel to prevent it from becoming soiled while she worked. Sewing, Mrs. Montfort held, was a praiseworthy and sociable occupation, one to be pursued in public, save when too intimate garments were in course of making. She disapproved of furtive stitching in bedrooms; indeed, she deprecated the use of bedrooms for any purpose other than that of sleep; and she had trained Melian well. Even now, on the edge of revolt, the discipline of years still held, so that the girl took up her dress, covered it with the towel, and prepared to descend.

Halfway across the room she heard her name called. At the door it was repeated. She knew from the direction of the sound that Mrs. Montfort must be at the

foot of the stairs, or on the staircase itself, coming in search of her.

"She won't let me alone," said Melian, half aloud, between her teeth. "All right, then."

Yielding to a sudden impulse, in which were blended exasperation with her aunt and a desire to spite, though he could never know it, that nephew of Mrs. Finn for whom she was to look her best, Melian thrust her forefinger into the tear at the gathers and pulled savagely. The frail stuff made no resistance. A jagged rift appeared in the back breadth of the skirt, which two hours' labour would hardly suffice to mend. Her own violence alarmed her. This was war declared. She was saved, as by fire, from the India muslin, and had, by a gesture, determined her right to appear before all the Finns in her spotted, looking as she chose. With her head proudly held, and the rift in the pale skirt fully displayed, she went to meet her aunt.

v

Frank was to drive them the five miles to their destination in a strange equipage which swung low upon its springs and had a hood shaped like a pumpkin, yet contrived, despite these features, to suggest a hearse. As Melian emerged upon the steps he was standing at the horse's head adjusting the bit, dressed in the great-coat which he had worn the night before, now tightly buttoned, with a decent stock showing above it. This coat made her feel awkward, recalling, as it did, that minute's hushed talk in the candlelight, and she had a mind to go in again to the house until her aunt should come. But this was mere cowardice. She brushed it aside, and instead of retreating addressed a remark to

Frank, coming down to put a hand on the glossy shoulder of the horse.

"How Pompey's coat shines!"

Frank touched his hat as he answered:

"Yes, miss. I was at him an hour with the dandy-brush."

"He's fat, too," Melian went on, eyeing Pompey as though she had not watched him every day browsing and idling in the three-cornered field at the garden's foot.

"Spring grass, miss," Frank answered.

Then without reference, without warning, hurrying his words, he went on:

"Is there anything I could do, miss? Anything you want done?"

Melian stared at him. They had swung back, with this offer, from daylight and sun to the shadowy encounter of the night. He repeated, mumbling, very red in the face:

"Any little thing you might be wanting done. I'd be glad, Miss Melian——"

She could trust him. This gratitude was genuine, though its motive was still obscure. She said, on the spur of the moment:

"There's a letter I might want posted——"

He nodded, and held out a hand.

"I have not got it here. I don't know that it will be necessary to send it at all." Then, suddenly, for this was mere toying with opportunity, and with her own fixed resolve:

"Wait!"

She ran again up the steps, through the hall and so up to her bedroom, and opened the little desk of green

leather. She snatched out the letter, and tucked it, crumpled out of all neatness, into the tiny beaded bag that held her handkerchief. It was too evident there; the bag was distorted by it. She took it out and pushed it down the front of her bodice, where it lay hidden completely, but gave little creaks as she moved. This risk she accepted, preparing a lie for her aunt should she comment, that the bodice had shrunk in washing, and was tight when she breathed.

This done, she hurried down again, just too late. The outline of her aunt's back bulked stately in the front doorway; there could be no question of handing over the note until that back was turned. The ill-luck of it made Melian sulky for a moment, so that her uncle, who had wandered from his study to see the carriage safely away, offered a comment and a consolation.

"Surely, my dear," said Mr. Montfort, "a very April face! Well, well. Keep the clouds for us, but let the young men see a little sunshine; they will coax the sun out. Young men have this trick with girls, but are not good for much else, that I can discover."

He gazed inquiringly about him, as though in the trees, or in the shining green of the laurels, could be found another and less ephemeral use for young men.

"You are keeping us, Simon," Mrs. Montfort reminded him.

"True, true. Very thoughtless. Frank, you are ready? Be off then. Take good care of the ladies."

Frank, sitting very straight on his box, touched with the whip first his hat, then Pompey's hind quarters; the conveyance moved away at a fair pace, carrying with apparent indifference its freight of two conspirators, a tyrant, and a secret; or perhaps more secrets than one.

CHAPTER TWO

PLINY ABBOTS

I

THE country through which they drove was bare, without hedges, save for those that bordered the road. Unbroken by trees, it swelled in smooth waves towards the sky, dipped to valleys which no undergrowth masked, lifting again here and there to hills on which the chalky outcrops showed white, and which were wrinkled with tracks made by the feet of sheep. The houses by the roadside were thatched and built of stone, standing in places where houses of wattle and clay had stood before them: across the fields tilled by their owners a great dyke ran, which set a course for the ploughs, an earth-work raised for the defence of some kingdom whose memory was lost. The white road which the carriage followed was Roman. There had been roads before it, narrow and winding, that followed the roll and sway of the hills, keeping always to the skyline. Traces still were left of these paths, a sinking of the turf, a different texture of grass, faint yet continuous, hardly to be recognised; shepherds used them even now, walking unawares over the sites of battles, and of hearthstones that had been cold three thousand years.

The occupants of the carriage cared no more than the shepherds for these things, and sat in silence waiting for the milestones to pass. Both knew the road, and could anticipate its every aspect. They knew the two hills that must be taken at a walk; the dip between these where

stood a solitary inn, The Chough, with a group of trees behind it and a stone horse-trough in front, hollowed like a coffin; the final mile of flat country across which the road ran undeviating, so that the roofs and spires of Pliny Abbots were visible, at its end, small as a town viewed through the wrong end of a spy-glass. Apart from these outward signs, the road had no memories, either for Mrs. Montfort or her niece. It had never led, for them, towards exultation or away from hope: It had borne them towards meals, church services, shops, and conversation: Mrs. Montfort's first sight of it had been on the first evening of her married life, driving to a Christian home, and if during that drive she had known any apprehensions, they vanished when the Rectory came in view, a house neat and kempt, hers to control and know. She had married this house, together with an income not to be despised—it was before the wars had brought fortunes to such contractors as her brother—and she had married a calling, as distinct from a trade. She had every reason to be satisfied, and she was satisfied. Relentlessly she did her duty in that station to which it had pleased God to call her; her conscience approved her every act. The Roman road might have stood for a symbol of her life, running, as it did, from comfort to greater comfort, with at either end a spire, and no scenery of a distracting nature to lure the traveller into byways and the perils of adventure. Her silence, therefore, was all that it seemed, and held nothing more urgent than a querulous appetite, with some speculation as to the dishes which awaited them at the Finns'.

Melian's was another silence. Beneath it ran, this way and that, questions, defiance, fears, and questions

again. Would she, when they arrived, be left for one moment alone with Frank? Would not Sabina be waiting, or the unknown nephew come out to hand them from the carriage? How long would it take to dispose of the note? And if she were caught in the act, what then? She chafed against the nephew's imaginary interference, and disliked him with an intensity which no veritable insult or annoyance from him could have bettered. He took on the likeness of that young man who had repudiated her and her bones in the ballroom, and at every turn got in the way of her thoughts. Since her plans must depend on circumstances which she could not foresee, she might have been content to leave the settlement of her problem to chance; but with each breath a tiny protesting sound within her bodice reminded her that the task which she had set herself was not done, and each milestone found her torturing her problem to a shape which should fit any eventuality.

Thus, calm and perplexity seated side by side, they left the last descent behind them, and came to the flat final stretch of road.

II

The Finns' house was not quite in the town. It stood apart, set in grounds that were as yet merely hopeful with young shrubs. No trees sheltered it, though many had been planted, and the new red brick house, thus open to air and light, had a cheerful and friendly look, as of a healthy person who spent much time out of doors, and took the weather as it came. It was visible as soon as the fifth milestone was reached, its roof bright coloured against the greys and greens of the town beyond, and the double line of rushes, which was all that

betrayed the presence of a river, wandering where the plantations ended.

As the house came in sight Mrs. Montfort roused herself and turned to look sharply at her niece, a glance which assessed her appearance and the effect upon it of the spring air, raw, now that the sun had withdrawn, and destructive of bloom.

"As I feared," said she, "that veil was not sufficiently thick. It has not protected you from the cold. Pinch your cheeks a little; it does not suit you to look delicate."

Melian did not dare to proffer open disobedience; as a half measure she lifted her gloved hands to her cheeks and rubbed them vigorously, so that by the time they reached the gates of Amelia Lodge a disorderly glow had appeared, which gave the effect of a dairywoman flushed from her labours, and was as unsatisfactory to Mrs. Montfort as the pallor which it displaced.

Eagerly, as they entered the turn of the drive, Melian leaned forward to spy out the manner of their welcome and guess at her own chances. But the sound of their wheels had been heard. Almost at once the door opened, and a stout gentleman in a puce coat, Mr. Finn himself, appeared at the top of the steps, while behind his shoulder, wrapped in a crimson shawl, his daughter Sabina stood watching. Melian's hand had been at her bosom in readiness; now she let it gather her cloak about her throat in preparation for descent. No action was possible. Resigned, without a glance at Frank, she followed her aunt up the steps towards the purple face of Mr. Finn and Sabina's warm-coloured shawl.

Mr. Finn was unaccustomed to waste time in pretty

speeches. Hospitality, to his mind, was represented by food, warmth, and occasional exercise in the form of dancing; words, in his opinion, could add to nobody's enjoyment, though he liked to hear a buzz of them; and thus he made short work of Mrs. Montfort's opening speech.

"Well, well, here you are," said he, interrupting, "and not before your time; but then ladies are angels, a burnt roast is nothing to them. In with you both, in with you out of this draughty weather. Your man knows his way, he has only to follow his nose. Now, Sabina, why do you keep Miss Melian standing? You may chatter inside."

A wave of his hand set the carriage again in motion, driving off towards the stables, while Mr. Finn, with arms spread wide, shepherded the three ladies in a bunch through his front door. He could not have quashed Melian's hopes more completely had he been his own nephew.

III

In the drawing-room by a brilliant fire Mrs. Finn sat smiling, with her hands folded as near her lap as their short arms would permit. She wore a dress the very colour of her husband's cheeks, which served admirably as background for two gold chains and a brooch framing weeping willows executed in hair. The drawing-room was as placid as herself, decorated in stately and comfortable colours with gilding here and there; she was at ease in it as was the brooch upon her own bosom, and moved about it as calmly as the brooch rose and fell.

By the mantelpiece, one arm crooked upon it, one hand playing with his shirt-frill, stood a young man of mild appearance, dressed in the arrogant extreme of fashion. His coat-collar rolled halfway up the back of his head, his legs were so tightly encased that no wrinkle showed behind the knee; he wore a signet ring set with an amethyst, another seal at his fob, and his hair was kept in place with scented grease. All this magnificence gave his face but small chance to assert its individuality; but its owner was not exigent. Being possessed of a slight and graceful figure, he was content to make the best of this, leaving to his features the sole duty of topping the edifice as well as they might, and lending support to the hats which crowned it. He did not shift his attitude, but remained leaning on the mantelpiece and took stock of aunt and niece as they were greeted by their hostess.

"My dear Mrs. Montfort, you have come a long way. It is a long way from Thrope. Very kind of you indeed to give us your company. We are to have dinner soon. Yes, we dine at four, unless it happens that there is some delay." Mrs. Finn turned about, deliberate as a ship swinging with the tide, and brought the young man within her orbit.

"My nephew," she announced, "Jefferey Galliard, my poor sister's boy. Secretary to Sir Hilary—a great surprise for us all. Yes, poor Harriet's boy——"

Mr. Galliard removed his arm from the mantelpiece to bow, and even put himself out so far as to place chairs for the newcomers before he resumed his posture.

"My aunt," said he to these, "always refers to my dear mother as if she were no longer alive."

"She lives in London," Mrs. Finn replied, justifying herself.

"Do people live elsewhere?" inquired Mr. Galliard blandly. They had no time to recover from this urbane insolence before he continued:

"The country, I fear, can only be regarded as a vast turnip field. Some of the turnips are hollowed out and set up on poles with a candle inside them; these are the squires and county members."

"Fie!" said Mrs. Finn, "and what of their ladies?"

"I say nothing of ladies. I do not include them in my summary. Ladies can, and do, deify even a turnip field."

With this Mr. Galliard bent his head upon his hand and gazed into the fire with the sadness becoming to a philosopher.

"You have been in the country just ten days," said Mrs. Finn, "ten days almost to the minute, for you arrived as we were sitting down to dinner on Tuesday last. Quite a little commotion. But I should have remembered the day in any case, for we had ventured upon some fish which was not very fresh. It came out of the river here; I do not remember the name of the fish. However, in spite of that, it was not very fresh. So that he has really had no time to discover what the country is like, and I do not understand why he should speak of it so. We have had tolerably fine weather."

Mrs. Montfort, who, during this speech, had been making her own valuation of the young man, and had dismissed him irrevocably save as an appendage to Sir Hilary, now joined issue against him.

"You appear to have formed very strong convictions. May I inquire on what grounds?"

"On these, my dear madam," said Mr. Galliard, laughing, "my uncle's grounds. I have not set foot outside the shrubbery since I arrived."

This flippancy was succeeded by a short silence, in which Melian could hear echoing mutely, as it was repeated in her aunt's brain, the word "puppy."

"Cousin Jefferey brought me these ear-rings from town," said Sabina. She pulled back her curls from her ears and moved her head to set the golden bells swinging. Melian could not do less than admire.

"They are worn," said Mr. Galliard indifferently, "but I tell my cousin to beware. Such things are dated. Positively she must not be seen wearing them in three months' time."

Sabina demurred.

"Six months, then," responded Mr. Galliard, with indulgence. "Fashion's eternity. And, besides, the country, one must remember! In the country one may dress to please oneself, an incredible saving of time. I believe that a country gentleman might come to be Prime Minister in the hours saved from choosing coats."

"Do you refer to Sir Hilary Pomfret?" Mrs. Montfort asked.

"Not I," Mr. Galliard replied negligently, "Hilary Pomfret has a very great natural incapacity, and a good head for claret, but neither of these qualities attains to Cabinet standard."

"How you talk," said Mrs. Finn comfortably. "I dare say I should be no wiser if I could understand you. And you are puzzling the girls. Do, pray, come to our level, and pay a few compliments, or ask what music we play. You see, the girls are silent. They are quite perplexed."

Mr. Galliard, with a delicate bow, was about to obey when he was interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Finn, preceded by a servant announcing dinner.

"I did you an injustice, Mrs. Montfort," said he, "you have done the roast no great harm after all."

He offered his arm, which Mrs. Montfort accepted, pardoning brusqueness in one whose grandfather had held an Irish bishopric. Mr. Galliard considered the remaining ladies with the air of Paris awarding his apple, and finally advanced upon his aunt with an arm poised ready to her hand.

"But you should attend the girls," said Mrs. Finn.

"I consult my own safety," answered Mr. Galliard, distributing his glance.

"You need not," said Mrs. Finn, "they are neither of them on the lookout for husbands. No, indeed, they are strange girls, both of them detest men. You are quite safe."

She moved away, and the two girls followed. Melian, on a sudden impulse, imitated Mr. Galliard's walk and bearing, offering her arm to Sabina with an inclination as delicate as that of her model, and even attempted his smile; but Sabina looked, first confused, then angry, avoided Melian's hand, and pretended to be busy adjusting her new shawl. Melian suddenly saw how the land lay, but too late to withdraw her mimicry; she had to make the best of it.

"Your cousin's manners are very different from those of the gentlemen here."

Sabina gave her a glance which showed that she was not appeased, and replied, with spirit:

"So much the better. I, for one, don't wish to go on being countrified all my life."

Melian had no answer sufficiently meek, and took her place in silence at the table with what composure she could summon at short notice.

The dinner was long and ample. It quelled those murmurs of appetite which during the drive had started up unbidden, to Mrs. Montfort's dismay. It defended Melian from the subtleties of Mr. Galliard, who ate little, and considered without approval her interest in the succession of dishes. It soothed Mr. Finn to a benign tolerance of epigram. It could not render Mrs. Finn more placid, but her smile grew wider, and the gold on her bosom seemed to glow more richly. Only Mr. Galliard was unaffected by the excellence of the meal. He played with his food, tilted his wine to and fro after a preliminary sniff to assure himself that it was not worthy of more reverent treatment; and when these resources failed, surveyed himself in the back of a spoon. In the intervals of monologue, a taste which his negligent appetite permitted him to indulge, he made inquiries as to Melian's tastes, prospects, and family.

"You live hereabouts, Miss Forster?"

"Yes, at Thrope."

"Thrope, ah. A quiet village."

"Very."

"And what occupation do you find?"

Melian, who rarely found any to her liking, heard herself answering, so great was her dislike of this young man's patronage:

"Oh, there is so much to be done! The housekeeping, linen, the preserves——"

"Ah, pheasants. But that is not your province, surely?"

"Not pheasants: fruit in season."

"Fruit!" said Mr. Galliard, closing his eyes. "Deliciously rustic. And do you dance on the sward when it is gathered?"

Mrs. Finn, who had caught the one word "dancing," leaned forward.

"Do I hear you promise us a ball, Jefferey?" she asked. "That is the very thing. Sir Hilary must give us a ball. I rely on you to persuade him. These girls will grow up quite savages."

"I dare not promise," Mr. Galliard answered, "he finds such entertainments insipid even in town."

"But Mawdry—such a waste of Mawdry to have no dancing in that great hall. Why does he come at all?"

Mr. Galliard lifted his shoulders.

"He must do something," Mr. Finn intervened. "No shooting yet, no voting, I believe, for a while longer. He may as well make gossip for the neighbourhood and let the Pliny ladies have a try at him."

"He provides his own company wherever he goes. He does not care to depend on chance for his acquaintance."

"Ladies as well?"

This question seemed, for some reason, to disconcert Mr. Galliard. His glance sought Melian almost furtively as he admitted the fact that Sir Hilary had invited ladies to Mawdry.

"But," said Sabina, with a gleam of hope, "if he brings ladies there must be gentlemen, too."

"Certainly, gentlemen; if you may call them so."

"What's this?" asked Mr. Finn sharply. "What sort of company does he keep, then?"

"Why," answered Mr. Galliard, "you may say that he keeps the company he pays for. He collects hangers-on as travellers in Italy collect intaglios."

"Indeed," said Mr. Finn, eyeing his wife's nephew sourly, and irritated by this criticism of the county's largest landowner, "and what do you count yourself?"

"I," answered Mr. Galliard, exquisitely smiling, "I stand between him and his tailor and his own bad taste. I write his speeches; I pay his——" He broke off. "I have other duties."

"And these other gentlemen, are they equally indispensable?"

"One or two scribblers. A halfway major lacking an arm. A prisoner of war, rebel, what you please; an American-Frenchman, who should, by rights, be on Dartmoor. This person Sir Hilary swears by, although the creature wears a beard. And for the rest—a menagerie, in short."

He made a gesture to express the impossibility of otherwise describing Sir Hilary Pomfret's household, and took a sip of wine.

"We have strayed from our ball," said Mrs. Finn, observing the danger signal in her husband's eye. "Do you not think, Mrs. Montfort, that a ball at Mawdry would be an excellent thing for us all?"

"On condition that the event should not be of too frequent occurrence," Mrs. Montfort replied. "I do not see that such an entertainment could do much actual harm."

"You are too cautious," said Mr. Finn. "Harm, indeed! Not too frequent! Do you not know, madam, that the surest way to rid these affairs of their attractions would be to hold them thrice a week and make attendance compulsory?"

"Jefferey must do his best for us," said Mrs. Finn, rising.

"Sit down, sir," said Mr. Finn almost simultaneously. "I like to share my wine."

Mr. Galliard, who had been preparing to quit his host for the more congenial society of the drawing-room, closed the door upon the ladies with a sigh, and taking up the decanter which Mr. Finn pushed towards him, poured out half a glass of port. Mr. Finn looked fiercely at what seemed an insult to his cellar, but his wife's nephew was proof against such glances, and would have endured Medusa's stare unflinching rather than take liberties with his figure.

IV

The short interval which had elapsed between the ladies' departure from the dining-room and the invasion of the drawing-room by the gentlemen might have been taken as sufficient proof that the latter, even with wine as the mediator, could find little solace in each other's society. The circle about the fire widened to admit them; and when Mr. Galliard had been accommodated with a chair, and Mr. Finn had taken four-square possession of the hearth, it seemed to Mrs. Finn that the soothing influence of a little music might well be given a trial.

"Open the instrument, Sabina," she commanded, "let your father and cousin hear the new piece. They may enjoy it."

Mr. Finn lent weight to the command.

"Come now, miss, let us hear what you can do. These instruments," turning to Mrs. Montfort, "are none of them worth a harp, in my opinion; indeed, they are nothing but harps done up in wooden boxes. What do you give us, Sabina? Nothing too noisy or martial."

"An arrangement of Scotch airs, Papa."

"Scotch airs! They are apt to be pretty loud."

"Not all, Papa. But I have not had time to practise them all."

"Well, well, play what you have practised most at and are surest of. Does Miss Melian keep up her music?"

"Unfortunately," responded Mrs. Montfort, "she is obstinate about performing. She has very little ear."

"And knows it? She must be a prodigy. Go on, my dear, go on. We are ready to attend."

Unwillingly, for she must leave Mr. Galliard seated close beside Melian, Sabina sat down, and her fingers gave out a thin melody, much decorated with arpeggios, which at first hearing seemed to owe more to Italy than to the glens. Mr. Galliard, true to his London habits, appeared to find the music stimulating, and broke at once into talk.

"You do not play, I think?"

"No," Melian answered briefly, and turned away, leaning her cheek on her hand with a great pretence of listening.

"How right you are," said Mr. Galliard, "music is intolerable, except from the very first performers."

He listened for a moment, but it was evident that he did not include his cousin in this distinction, for he began again to question.

"You do not go to London?"

"No."

"The country always? Country eternal?"

"Yes."

Bravado made her add:

"My father prefers it. Later, doubtless, when I am

older and more experienced, I shall take charge of his house."

"That is in London?"

"In London. Mecklenburg Square."

Mr. Galliard was silent, though the Scottish air had swelled to a degree of loudness which might have authorised, or at least covered, any comment he could wish to make. Melian, pleased that her link with London should have impressed him, no longer turned away; but a glance showed her that his expression of surprise was far more vivid than the occasion warranted. He spoke after a minute.

"Can it be—is it possible that you are the daughter of old—of Mr. Horatio Forster? Of Mecklenburg Square?"

"Do you know my father?" she asked, with sudden interest, turning quite to him.

"But," said Mr. Galliard, "this is very strange."

He looked at her as though there were indeed some romantic mystery implied in such kinship; then resumed lightly, with his previous manner:

"We are slightly acquainted. He sold a couple of horses to Sir Hilary six months ago, and we celebrated the bargain famously——" He seemed to check himself, and frowned. It was evident that he was puzzled by some circumstance in the acquaintance, and not quite at ease. The lament still swelled from the instrument. Melian waited, for his tone led her to suppose his sentence unfinished, and when she saw that he did not intend to continue, repeated:

"Papa prefers that I do not visit London. He is very much occupied—has a great many calls upon him. He considers the country more beneficial."

“Naturally, naturally,” Mr. Galliard agreed, almost fulsomely. “A great many calls. More suitable, certainly.”

Melian found herself for the second time in twenty-four hours face to face with a word whose significance she could not grasp, and which stirred her curiosity. Unsuitable! More suitable! Coming from her aunt, she could make a guess at the meaning; that residence with her father might involve, since she was an only daughter, and spoilable, a good deal too much of her own way. But what meaning could the word assume in the mouth of Mr. Galliard? That her father’s house was not a resort of fashion? Yet he had visited there, in company with a baronet, and been “famously entertained.” The suggestion of a mystery was not to be avoided. It quickened her desire to have done with Thrope, bare sweeping landscape and rolling sentences alike; known things these, and unchangeable; strong in their power to mould flesh and blood, spirit even, to their own image. Escape, discovery, new worlds, cried Melian’s heart so loudly that she put up her hand to it, and felt beneath soft muslin folds the stiff folds of her letter.

The Scottish airs came to their close in a rainy gust of notes, and a request from Mr. Galliard that Sabina should delight him again was met with hesitation. Sabina was willing, her eyes said, if he would turn over for her. He remained by Melian’s side: on which Sabina shut her instrument irrevocably and joined the circle about the fire.

“Noll Cromwell, eh?” Mr. Finn was saying. “There is a good deal to be said for Noll, and for his times. Too much Bible, saving your presence, ladies; but they made up for it by honesty in trade. Well, I am glad the Rector

has moved forward a little. He is no more than a century and a half, now, behind the times."

"A mere nothing," said Mr. Galliard. "He is modern, soldierly speaking; a loss to our general staff."

"I think," went on Mr. Finn, "that I have something that will interest him. A pamphlet, no great matter; but it deals in a satirical way with that Parliament known as the Rump, and so may be of service. Miss Melian, will you come with me to fetch it from the book-room? You have not seen the new arrangements there. Comfort has been studied. A man cannot take in ideas if he has to give attention to bodily inconveniences."

"Surely, my dear, you will not take Miss Melian all down that draughty passage just for a pamphlet?"

But already Melian was on her feet, which seeing, Mr. Galliard rose, too; his movement was the signal for Sabina to quit her chair, so that the circle, which had seemed so compact, was broken as instantly and easily as the circle made in water by a stone. Mr. Finn surveyed his trio of followers with amusement.

"A new thing for you, Sabina," said he, "to be taking to pamphlets; and for your cousin, too. Never mind, they will do you no great harm. Come along."

The book-room at Amelia Lodge was situated, like the Rector's study, somewhat apart from the main living-rooms. Only one other door opened into the passage which led to it, that of a servants' hall where the domestics took their meals; and this, as Mr. Finn with his satellites passed, sent out a glow of candles to dispute with the twilight. The passage was wide, and they entered it in pairs, Mr. Finn first with his daughter, Melian and Mr. Galliard following. It was not Melian's doing or wish that the distance between the pairs should

so increase, but her escort would not be hurried; all the way from the drawing-room he lagged, conversing; and it was not until Mr. Finn, with Sabina, had entered the library that he and Melian reached the door of the servants' hall. As they passed it a man emerged, looking over his shoulder back into the room; unsuspecting, he walked into Melian in the half darkness, and there was a threefold exclamation.

"My foot!"

"Miss, are you hurt?"

"Have a care, you fool!"

Melian, leaning against the wall, and in some pain, could not for the moment reply, but Mr. Galliard took up cudgels for her with every show of affected concern.

"Miss Forster, you are hurt. Lean on me. Shall I carry you to a chair? You are very much hurt. Who is this imbecile? Can you not look, man, where you are going? The stocking, at any rate, is ruined. Insufferable!"

"I'm mortal sorry, Miss Melian. Did I come on you heavy?"

"It's nothing, Frank," she answered, ignoring Mr. Galliard's perturbation, and fending off his attempts to support her. Foiled in this main issue, his activity took other forms.

"A light," said he, "a candle. Can you walk, Miss Forster? We must run no risk; a candle is the thing."

He pushed past Frank through the open door, leaving them together in the passage. It was the chance, and Melian acted swiftly; in an instant the letter was twitched from her bodice and thrust into Frank's hand. He was slower than she, and stood looking at the paper in surprise; before his fingers could close on it, or his

hand reach his pocket, Mr. Galliard appeared in the doorway holding a lamp. He had left the two standing apart, Melian leaning against the wall, her eyes closed, and Frank looking at her, distressed yet helpless, his hands hanging by his sides; the light discovered them at closer quarters, Melian upright, with brilliant guilty eyes, Frank shamefaced, with a scrap of paper in his hand which he instantly hid away in his pocket. Melian, meeting Mr. Galliard's alert gaze, felt her cheeks going scarlet; to explain was to admit; she said nothing, but took his offered arm. At the library door, unable to disregard his air of polite comprehension, she burst out:

"A letter to my father. Frank is to post it for me——"

"Indeed?" said Mr. Galliard. "Complaining, possibly, that the country lacks interest."

Melian, knowing that it was hopeless, stumbled on.

"You see, all the letters I write at Thrope are read——"

"With transports, I have no doubt," rejoined Mr. Galliard; and was taken up by Mr. Finn, emerging to search for the truants.

"Are you at transports already? Nay, there's plenty to come before that; soft glances, lifelong devotions—I don't know. Confound your London hurry! Why, she looks ill! Sit down, Miss Melian, you are safe among the books."

As she sat, thankfully, in a deep chair, above the curve of the celestial globe Melian caught Sabina's angry eyes.

v

Safely home, in the hall of the Rectory at Thrope, the usual smell of bees-wax greeted them, with a faint

memory of the servants' broth which the green baize door could not always confine within kitchen limits. The visit to the Finns had flared up, for an instant, almost to drama; but Melian, amid these familiar smells and furniture, could hardly believe that the dramatic moment had ever been. All that fear, all that blushing and contriving, misapprehension and rage, to be rid of a simple letter! Now that it was over, she felt a fool.

"When you have removed your outdoor garments and arranged your hair," said Mrs. Montfort, "which is by no means unruffled, you may take to your uncle the book which Mr. Finn was so obliging as to lend. I could wish that your uncle's researches and his did not coincide: it excites emulation and expense in acquiring documents."

Melian, smoothing her hair before her mirror, wondered; first at herself, her own temerity, her own cowardice; next at the mystery, if there were a mystery, of her father; lastly, at the smooth manner in which a day of expectation and stress may drift to its end amid normal duties and actions so familiar that they leave no trace in memory. Soon, she thought, it would be bedtime, when letters, aunts, all realities must for a few hours become insubstantial, weighing no more heavily in the balance of the mind than the fantastic images of a dream.

CHAPTER THREE

THROPE

I

THE days at Thrope had little individuality. Each had its duties; but since these duties were concerned chiefly with those needs of body and mind which recur unvarying at short intervals, they easily took on the hue of monotony, were accomplished and forgotten, to be resumed next day and forgotten once more. Mrs. Montfort, despite her reverence for the classics, would have been offended had anyone compared her care of her house to the labours of Sisyphus. Part of her resentment might have been traced to a picture which her memory had unwittingly retained, in which the laborious Titan was coarsely shown, undraped, presenting an appearance very different from the figure which daily ranged the Rectory in full-skirted majesty. Apart from this, she could never have admitted that her labours were fruitless or that they might be regarded by another person of different temper as a kind of cumulative torment. With confidence, and a pride which only awaited visits from less competent housewives to leap from concealment, she took up each day, by proxy, the burdens of dusting, polishing, scrubbing, and blackleading; enlivening the staple industries now and then by the dismantling of a chandelier or an assault with bees-wax upon her husband's leather-bound books. Against this background of routine the three meals of the day stood out in relief, each one vague with possibilities of delight.

These, flavoured with such variety as the skill of the cook and the season of the year might afford, would, in her opinion, have been sufficient proof that the comparison of her toil with that of Sisyphus was ill-founded.

This tending of her house and the preparation of food, with occasional scolding descents upon the villagers—not many of these; for while the church at Thrope was large, an off-shoot of the rich abbey, the village had dwindled to a handful of cottages whose inmates, by this time, knew better than to plead poverty as an excuse for excess—the duties, in fact, of her station in life, made up the chief of Mrs. Montfort's existence. They had always been her mainstay, and with the years had become her delight, so that she was able, after such an event as dinner with the Finns, and the debatable triumph of adding another young man to her niece's sphere of opportunity, to take up her everyday existence at the point where she had, for a few hours, gone aside from routine. During the week that followed this engagement she roved her house watchful and unruffled as before; unaware, save for a certain prickliness of temper, not unusual, of the anxiety that consumed Melian's days, and by night kept her from sleep.

This anxiety had a single cause. Speculation as to the impression her letter was to make on the almost unknown father, absorbed her. She did not know what to expect or what to hope for; the alternatives were too many, a letter, a rebuke, rescue, silence. Restlessly, during the days that followed, she wandered about the house and garden, losing the warm tint of her cheeks as her nights grew more wakeful, puzzling her uncle, and distressing her aunt with fears lest she might, as a result of the meeting with Mr. Galliard, be falling un-

suitably in love. This suspicion set her aunt probing, with much upholding of the secluded country life, and decrying of the gaieties of town; for she did not agree with Mr. Finn that the only remedy against frivolity and gadding was a surfeit of both. She set herself to draw the gloomiest picture of town amusements and manners, culled almost entirely from her own imagination; and having described them in a manner which made dinner with the Finns appear, by comparison, uproariously gay, would end, taking up her sewing, "We are more usefully employed here."

As a rule, Melian received these exordiums patiently; but the strain of expectation which bore upon her constantly, led her one morning at breakfast to make sharp answer. It was the opportunity for which her aunt waited; and, though she would have preferred that her husband should not be present, for it was his habit to blunder across the path of reproof, she could not let it go.

"What is that you say?" she asked; and this formality accomplished, without waiting for an answer, she drove on, "You say that you would rather be prettily idle than stupidly busy. No doubt; you accept those London notions very readily. I should be lax in my duty if I did not point out that I am already aware of your tendency to fritter your time. Your carelessness, your indifference, are incorrigible; and your uncle makes but little effort to assist me in my efforts to improve you. I cannot be always dosing you; you are not ill. I do not know what can be the meaning of this continued display of sullen temper."

Melian did not speak. On went the voice:

"Are you trying to emulate the heroine of a novel?"

It is very well for such girls to grow pale and be idle. They may let their castles and their India muslins fall to pieces, and be sure of a husband in the end. But you are in no such position. This affectation of ill-health and low spirits will gain you no admiration, and is merely ridiculous."

Mr. Montfort, who had been stirring uneasily in his chair during this chiding—with which, since it proceeded from the best motives, he could not directly interfere—now endeavoured to create a diversion by asking that more preserve should be ordered. His wife ignored the request, and continued to address her silent niece.

"It is my duty, as your aunt and a Christian, to see that some part, at least, of your day is not unworthily spent. When you have finished your breakfast, you will go to the parlour for an hour's needlework. There is a branch of the tree on my canvas to be finished. Do not attempt one of the sheep; you are not sufficiently skilled."

"My dear," said Mr. Montfort, taking courage, "you are so often in the right that I think you may afford, in this instance, to let me contradict you. Woolwork flowers, even woolwork sheep in a sunless parlour, can be no lasting remedy for low spirits. Melian requires exercise."

Mrs. Montfort gazed at him in surprise, unaccustomed as she was to defiance from such a quarter.

"A walk, for instance," Mr. Montfort continued, almost with a trace of wheedling in his tone, "a long walk, with an object."

"What object?" asked Mrs. Montfort, distrustfully.

"To be present at a scientific investigation," said Mr.

Montfort, his voice failing a little. "The opening of a tumulus——"

"Danbury!" said Mrs. Montfort sharply, and drew in her lips until her cheeks became almost hollow. "That sacrilegious project! I thought—I hoped—that it had been abandoned."

Her tone was dismaying, and had it been a question only of the defence of his niece, Mr. Montfort might, at this point, have abandoned the contest; but Melian, though he had sympathy for her, was no more than a stepping-stone. By way of her he approached this matter which he had feared to discuss in cold blood with his wife, a plan which drew him as no lure of the flesh could ever have done, and to which he had long decided that he must succumb. His curiosities lent him a courage which the best proven maxims, the most sacred obligations of his calling could not inspire; and he battled for them now with an energy which left Melian out of account, though she might be allotted a share in the spoils of victory.

"Pardon me, Julia," said Mr. Montfort firmly. "Danbury is not consecrated ground, and it is by no means certain that this mound was a burial-place of any kind. In any case, there can be no sacrilege in disturbing the earth above pagan bones."

"Unnecessary," said Mrs. Montfort briefly, there ending, in intent, the discussion.

"Highly interesting," said Mr. Montfort, pursuing it.

"To a young girl?" Mrs. Montfort inquired ironically. "As well teach her Greek."

"And why not?" inquired Mr. Montfort stoutly. "It is the basis. I would found all professions upon it, and all trades, too. A man would make a better groom who

could repeat, as he went about his duties, those admirable words of Zeus, anent the horses of Achilles——”

“It is my intention,” announced Mrs. Montfort implacably, “that Melian shall accompany me this afternoon to take soup to one or two necessitous homes, and to visit Mary Ance’s daughter, who, if rumour may be believed, is incapacitated. As for you, Simon, your presence, at what I can only regard as an impious anticipation of the revelations proper to the Last Day, can well be dispensed with.”

Mr. Montfort, confronted with this impregnable resolve, had no scruple in using, on Melian’s behalf and his own, a weapon which chance had put into his hand.

“Phœbe Ance!” he exclaimed. “Do you go to visit her, my dear? Do you know the nature of her illness?”

Mrs. Montfort looked, and swelled inquiry.

“George Irons spoke of it,” Mr. Montfort proceeded. “He was circumstantial; and from what he said, it appears to be a case”—he coughed—“for remonstrance rather than for soup.”

“Indeed?” said Mrs. Montfort slowly.

“Certainly,” her husband replied.

“In that case,” said Mrs. Montfort, largely rising over the table, like an autumn moon over pasture-land, “Melian had better accompany you on your expedition, if you are determined to make it. The fresh air, as you say, is doubtless to be preferred——”

She did not say to what; but her stern eye gave promise that she would deal alone and very faithfully with whatever in Phœbe Ance’s conduct called for remonstrance.

CHAPTER FOUR

DANBURY

I

DANBURY was distant from Thrope some seven miles, and lay northwest, across gently undulating plains whose fields, divided by trenches and dykes, sheltered by few trees, displayed their different coloured soils and the occasional green of fallow like a patchwork quilt spread out over half a county. When the country people spoke of Danbury they meant, not the farm of that name alone, but the low hill forming its northern boundary, to which the smooth miles of plain finally ascended. This hill was not too steep for cultivation, and was ploughed with the rest of the land; only from a mound on its summit the plough had always turned aside, so that the turf here was rich and close with centuries of undisputed growth. This mound was Danbury, and from it the farm and the fields took their title. There were stories told of it which Mr. Montfort despised and Mr. Finn collected; as that it was a gathering-place for witches, to be avoided on midsummer night, when the devil, without his breeches, sat on it as a throne, receiving homage and watching the dance. Whatever its origin—and save that it was not a natural formation, but had been raised by men's hands, nothing was sure—the first makers had known how to keep it sacred, and the tradition of reverence or fear still lived. Few credited the devil story, but no labourer would strike spade into the mound, and hitherto the farmer

would hear no question of any such proceeding. Mr. Montfort, whose own simple theory required for its proof no more than the cutting of a trench, had long despaired of an opportunity; and the farmer's sudden decision to let the Pliny gentlemen have their way had surprised him more entirely than any event since his marriage.

Enclosed in a pleasurable trance, busy with speculations in which his niece had no part, he returned no answer save a smile to the reiterated questions with which she plagued him during the first part of their drive. What was to be done at Danbury? What was to be expected or found? Did the green patch mark a monument or a grave? Treasure, perhaps? Mr. Montfort had no answer; she hindered his speculations and threw them into disorder by her talk. Gently he disregarded her, and when she became too insistent, patted her hand. She was a young lady, unfitted to receive antiquarian confidences, or to be burdened with antiquarian hypotheses; he smiled, and was silent. Melian, after a last assault upon his tranquillity, ceased to hope for an answer, and leaned back, watching the hill draw nearer, its slope darkened from time to time by shadows of cloud.

Their road ceased some little distance from Danbury Farm, and they were obliged to leave the carriage and make their way on foot along the lane, rough with crusted mud. Frank was bidden to wait. Melian, whose languor and lack of colour had earned for her a share in the expedition, walked without repugnance through mud that wetted her stocking above the half-boot, and strode widely in her uncle's wake with clutched gown and glowing cheeks, enjoying her emancipation from

the behaviour that was to secure for her a husband.

The track led them at last under the very windows of the farm, where, at the pump, they saw the farmer's wife stooping. She turned half towards them at the sound of the gate, her arm never ceasing its lift and fall. Mr. Montfort bade her good-day, adding:

"Where is your good husband, Mrs. Goard? This is a fine thing, to let us come digging at last—a fine example. Well, well, Goard need not be afraid of the devil."

The woman answered as though she had not heard him.

"Mr. Montfort. Come to forbid their goings-on, I hope."

Mr. Montfort turned his eyes from the hill, upon whose green mound men were moving, to regard her blankly.

"Scattering old dead bones," the farmer's wife went on, ceasing to jerk up the pump-handle, and bringing her hands square to her hips, "that's what they're doing on Danbury Hill. They'll get no good of it. Been at Goard, so I have, night in, night out, and might just so well have talked to a tree. It's wrong-doing, gentlemen or no gentlemen; and when it comes to clergy——" She took up her pail, and with her free left hand made a strange monitory gesture.

"You should think shame, I say, a parson and a lady, prying among the dead like resurrectionists. If harm comes, and harm will, I've warned ye."

"My friends expect me," said Mr. Montfort gently, "and we have your husband's leave. Come, Melian."

She followed obediently. They passed within three feet of the woman, standing stock-still with her pail. She said no word as they went by, only watched them as

they picked their way through the filth that the cows had left, grinning as their shoes were almost dragged from their feet in the slough. When they reached the corner of the outhouse, suddenly she put her hands to her mouth and bawled after them:

"That's as it should be! Dirt to dirt!"

She made a gesture which only Melian saw, and spat before she swung in at her door.

"Strange," said Mr. Montfort, as though to himself, beginning to mount the hill. "Ignorance and fear; fear and violence. Indissoluble."

Melian had a sudden recollection; and coming up beside him, asked:

"Mrs. Goard! Is not that Alice's mother—our Alice?"

"My dear, I don't know, I'm sure," said he, steadily mounting the hill, "but Alice is a pretty, quiet girl. I should not like to think so."

Melian, however, was sure, and thought in her surprise how from some situations even her aunt's house might seem a refuge. In silence, climbing, they came to the hill-top.

II

Their approach was not observed. All were intent. The two workmen laboured in a pit, deep enough already to hide them to the waist. The three or four onlookers watched each shovelful of earth as it was thrown on to the heap. Beyond, on that side of the hill which was hidden from the road, their horses stood together, drooping heads now and then to sniff for any trace of green in the tilled earth. Mr. Montfort was among the onlookers before they saw him, and seized a bulky figure by the arm.

"Why, who's there?" said the figure, turning to reveal the features and imperial colouring of Mr. Finn. "You, Montfort? I thought you'd failed us. And Miss Melian, that's good. Not many girls would drag their petticoats through the mud for a parcel of stones."

And approvingly he surveyed her from head to foot, her strayed hair, overheated cheeks, soiled gown, and shoes so caked with mud as to seem twice their usual size.

"Not many girls," Mr. Finn continued, driving the point well home, "care enough for these things to make guys of themselves. Your uncle's niece, my dear! And a girl of spirit, too."

This very dubious compliment caused Melian to draw back and put her hands to her hair, making some attempt to restore it to order while the men talked. Mr. Montfort asked:

"How comes it that Goard sees reason at last?"

"We have an accident to thank—a broken plough-share. During the early ploughing he turned too close to the mound and snapped his share on a stone."

"I am astonished. I thought that the old prejudice would not be overcome in our time."

"Overcome! That it isn't, but for the moment temper prevails. The hill does Goard an injury, he'll injure the hill. But the old spirit is still there." Mr. Finn indicated the trench, and lowered his voice. "These men, for example, digging. We had to bring them from Pliny. No man hereabouts would touch the job, for any pay. And you see, Goard himself does not come. Afraid of the devil, so they tell me, or of his wife, more likely."

Mr. Finn laughed with a good deal of enjoyment at the idea of any man being frightened by either of these powers.

"How long have they been at work?" Mr. Montfort asked, peering into the trench.

"An hour, no more. Nothing to reward us, as yet. We started to dig at the very point where the share broke. The stone is there, a boulder, nothing more; no evidence of tools having been used upon it——"

"What kind of stone?" cried Mr. Montfort excitedly. "What does a boulder, any boulder, do here, on the top of a hill that is all marl and clay? Show me the stone!"

They moved away in talk, leaving Melian to fend for herself. The shovels now were being applied in another direction, and the thick earth tossed out by them was falling almost at her feet. A gentleman in a brown coat, enlivened by a waistcoat of yellow flannel, who had been breaking clods asunder very carefully with his toe, and staring at the results with considerable gravity, drew near for this purpose, with a sour look at Melian, as though she might interfere, or take part unbidden in the rite. The gentleman was uneasy, torn between disapproval of her presence and longing to investigate the promising unbroken clods within the outer radius of her skirt. The most alluring of all lay just by her foot, a large lump of earth that might very comfortably have held a skull; this he coveted; he could not take his eyes from it. Other shovelfuls were coming in his direction, thudding down and scattering on the edge of the grass; still Melian stood fast, struggling with a pin at her waist and unconscious of the gentleman's envy. He came nearer, as a bird in winter will sidle close to the hand holding the crumb, afraid to peck, yet tempted. Melian ignored him. The gentleman muttered, jerked at his waistcoat, and prepared to

stoop; when she, having secured her pin, and reckless, since her shoes could carry no more mud, let fly a kick with all her might at the object of his desire. A yelp broke from the gentleman.

"Madam," he cried shrilly, "kindly restrain yourself. Do not be so violent, madam!"

And he knelt above the maltreated clay, feeling in it tenderly with his hands. Melian, thus suddenly made aware of crime, could not emulate her aunt's magnificent calm in a similar emergency. She blushed, retreated, and offered apologies to the gentleman's back, wondering all the while what iniquity she had committed. A single kick! She could only conclude that his standards of lady-like behaviour must be high.

He rose from his knees after a time, dusting his hands together and looking at her with reproach.

"You should remember," said he, in more normal tones, "that here you are not at a ball. These leaps and bounds will not do."

He eyed her coldly and coldly listened to her explanations, which included a denial that such conduct was customary at balls. At length:

"What would be your feelings," inquired the gentleman, waving her words aside, "to learn that you had, by this ill-considered action, crushed to powder an amphora?"

Melian could not answer, could not estimate her feelings in the case of damage to an imaginary object of which she had not even heard. But she answered politely:

"I should be very sorry indeed, sir."

"Sorry!" repeated the gentleman, his voice mounting to its former shrillness. "You would be sorry!

You would be something very different; you would be a by-word, madam, let me tell you. And deserve it!"

With this he left her, and set to work once more with the toe of his boot among the newer shovelfuls that had not ceased to be heaped on the lip of the pit.

In the quiet which ensued, descending suddenly like a premonition upon the groups, there sounded a new note from one of the tools; the ring, unmistakable, of iron against metal or stone. The antiquarians, whose watchfulness had cooled a little during their hour of aimless waiting, were instantly alert, and crowded forward, calling out questions and advice.

"What was it, Job?"

"Gently, gently with the spade, man."

The man withdrew his spade and stooped to uncover the obstacle with his hands. His companion took the opportunity to rest and watch him, smearing the sweat from his forehead with the free arm, and smiling at the notion of four or five sane and sober gentlemen riding ten miles to see a quarter-ton of dirt shifted. Job, squatting in the trampled bottom of the trench, looked upwards into the intent and cleanly faces that circled it above.

"Lump of stone, seemingly. Smaller than t'other, though."

With this, burrowing his hands underneath it and straddling his legs, he gave a heave that dislodged it from its bed, and lifted it above his head, in which attitude he stood for a few seconds with something of the menacing look of a Titan. The peering Olympians involuntarily recoiled; and with a grunt he swung it on to the heap of earth at their feet. His companion cast

his shovel, like a javelin, a little to the right of the stone's late socket; it struck with the same clang of metal and fell.

"Again!" cried Mr. Finn. "Try to the left, Matthew! Cut crosswise. Now we shall see, Montfort, about these Danes of yours. The stones form a circle, I'll bet a guinea, and what is the purpose of a stone circle? Not burial. Danbury, Dane-bury. Pooh, it is no more than a play upon words."

"Good etymological evidence," Mr. Montfort contradicted. "The proper interpretation of place-names is vital——"

"Evidence! You neglect evidence. You look for it in books and won't take it up when it lies under your nose. Tradition, there's your surest guide. There is no memory of any Danes among the people, no talk of them."

"And much talk of the devil," said Mr. Montfort, almost sneering.

"Small wonder," replied Mr. Finn hotly. "I have heard much talk of him from you, for that matter; from your pulpit; and it ill becomes one of your cloth to drag him down to the level of mere Danes. He is your bread and butter, he and his works; the Almighty needs no crier. I say again that this has been a sacred place, a place of sacrifice."

"Sacred, a heathen altar?"

"To the heathen—certainly. Why, the people remember it. They will not lay a finger to it. Why should they wish to preserve from desecration the bones of a pack of dead Danes?"

The gentleman who had rebuked Melian now approached, lured by the dispute.

"I trust, gentlemen, to see you both proved wrong,"

said he, "I follow neither words nor tradition; both may be corrupted. I follow history. Rome! There you have your answer."

"It is contrary to the ordinary practice of Roman sepulture, sir," another sternly corrected him.

"Who spoke of sepulture, sir?" fiercely inquired the yellow waistcoated patron of the Roman theory. "Commemoration, sir. Triumph, sir. The Romans were like game-cocks. Suppose a victory won upon this hill-top. What would be their impulse? To proclaim it. They erect a mound——"

"Improbable," objected his opponent, turning out of the wind to take snuff. "They used stone for such a purpose. Witness the Trophy of Augustus at——"

"I am supposing, sir," said the yellow waistcoat coldly, "this army to be in haste."

"A victorious army?" inquired his opponent, mocking.

"Why not, sir?" replied the gentleman in the yellow waistcoat, and finding no further argument that would bear the weight of this attack, repeated with truculence: "Why not?"

There was a jingling and a sound of hoofs on the northern slope of the hill. The disputants looked round, towards their own steeds first, but these stood patiently; then towards the road lower down. Two horsemen were coming towards them, well-mounted both, though one sat at ease, and the other held his reins awkwardly. The former was elegantly coated in bottle-green, and wore a grey hat, whose brim curled with the inevitable grace of a wave; the latter seemed thicker set, and his head seemed uncovered. There was a murmur of interest and inquiry.

"Who are these?" asked one nervously. "Will they interfere?"

"I think not," Mr. Montfort said, his hand rounded like a spy-glass to his eye. "At least, I believe I can answer for one. It is Sir Hilary Pomfret, he on the roan. The other I do not know."

Mr. Finn, too, focussed with his hand the pair as they came.

"And I can put a name to the other," said he, "from the tattle of my wife's nephew, if one may believe it."

But the antiquarians cared little for the other. They stared at their member, their figurehead; and Melian, unheeded, on tiptoe among them, stared, too, at the legendary giver of balls, buyer of horses; her father's acquaintance.

"One of his household," resumed Mr. Finn. "Friend, hanger-on, pensioner, what you like. A Frenchman."

This roused his audience. They repeated, in incredulous chorus, above which the shrill tones of Rome's patron rang high:

"Frenchman?"

"A short beard and a sailor's seat on a horse; this should be the man. De Lannion is his name."

One of these characteristics had been evident from afar, and now the other became apparent. It was a brown face, forehead and cheeks equally tanned; the short beard pointed his chin and made the upper part of the face seem wide. Hair and beard were dark. Melian could not, at that distance, tell the colour of his eyes. She liked at once, and pitied him, remembering Jefferey Galliard's popinjay contempt, and that he was a prisoner.

They were almost at the summit, Sir Hilary riding a little in front, bringing his horse to a quicker gait, careless of the hill. He touched his hat to the fluttered antiquaries, paying them the same tribute which acknowledged the bow of his lodge-keeper; and asked, hardly raising his weary townsman's voice:

"Well, gentlemen, what news? Any gold as yet? Treasure-trove goes to Government, remember."

He saw Melian, and once more his hand went to his hat, which he lifted slightly and with care. Mr. Montfort answered his inquiring glance.

"My niece, Sir Hilary."

Sir Hilary considered Melian as she curtseyed with what grace her clodded boots would permit, and with an ambiguous sentence dismissed her.

"She should inspire your researches."

He bowed slightly, and called over his shoulder:

"Yves!"

The hatless man kicked his horse, so that it thundered forward with a start into the midst of the group.

"Captain de Lannion," said Sir Hilary negligently, adding with a glance of amusement at the inquisitive faces: "My good friend; lately, our enemy."

Captain de Lannion bowed without grace; to Melian first, then collectively and gravely to the men, who returned his salute with nods. Melian smiled, however. She saw that, in spite of his dark hair, the eyes were blue and very bright, sailor's eyes; English sailor or French, to her it was all one, and she remembered a phrase from a letter of Carew, where he quoted his commander's verdict on Villeneuve's men: "Silly seamen, but great fighters." She could imagine this awkward

man at ease upon a quarterdeck and thinking out the picture, looked at him longer than she meant, and grew red; needless confusion, for he had not seen, and appeared to be listening with attention to the talk, trying to pierce the meaning of this slurred foreign tongue, with its broad vowels and the odd, lisping sounds that ran through it.

"Only two men to dig," Sir Hilary was saying, "you'll never have done, gentlemen."

The antiquaries admitted with shrugs and murmurs that this was so.

"I confess I am impatient. How long at your present rate will it take to investigate thoroughly?"

The antiquaries consulted each other with looks, and answered, resigned:

"Two days."

"Longer if we need to make several sections."

"It will not do to go too fast——"

But with good-humoured impatience, as of a man who, in all his life, had never had to wait, Sir Hilary interrupted.

"Two days for the key to a secret? Smash the lock, gentlemen!"

"All very well, Sir Hilary," bluntly said Mr. Finn. "All very well, sir, for you, but there are reasons why we must go quietly."

The antiquaries nodded like mandarins. But Sir Hilary would have none of their excuses and mysteries.

"Where is your difficulty? Get some more fellows from the farm down yonder. My orders; I'll pay. Let us see something for our ride besides a hole in the ground which suggests epitaphs."

Sir Hilary's languid voice contrasted with the im-

patience of the words he chose; and the contrast gave the man, who had never learned to savour a wine, though, as Mr. Galliard could vouch, he had a head for it.

"Well, sirs, why not?" he challenged the silent antiquaries.

They stirred and murmured, looking to Mr. Montfort to answer, as having closest acquaintance with the great man; but Mr. Montfort shrank, unwilling to offer an unpalatable statement to his patron. Once again it was Mr. Finn who took up the words.

"With all respect, Sir Hilary, and thanks for your offer, I think we touch something here that needs more tender handling."

"What is it you expect to find? Pottery? Glass?"

"I don't speak of these excavations. I speak of local feeling; local prejudice. You must be aware of it, sir."

Sir Hilary laughed a strangely hearty laugh that reddened his face in a moment.

"I have heard of some superstition. But you have a clergyman with you."

"This goes back further than Church authority."

"Authority! Well—but persuasion?"

"I had rather try butter on a hornet's nest," answered Mr. Finn. "No, no, Sir Hilary. We must go gently. We have the farmer's word at present; that is to say, we are pretty safe from horse pistols. It is not much, but we must be thankful."

"You amuse me," said Sir Hilary, with another of his laughs, into which broke a sharp exclamation in French from behind his shoulder.

"Eh?" Sir Hilary answered it. "A crowd of men—where?"

The silent horseman gestured with his riding-crop southwards, towards the farm-house. Sir Hilary stared, grinned and said:

"So they are, the rascals. We'll see some fun for our ride yet."

Men were coming up the hill from the southern side in twos and threes, a dingy and purposeful crowd. Their hands were not empty; each one carried an implement, pitchfork or pruning sickle, that the season did not warrant; plough-shares turned for the nonce to swords. They came quietly, saving their breath, and scattered, seeming to have no leader, but from a window at the back of the farm-house a woman's voice halloed them on, brassy as the screech of a trumpet.

Innocently curious, unfamiliar with the signs and aspects of coming violence, and confident in the presence of Sir Hilary, the antiquaries watched the advance.

"Rascals," said the gentleman in the yellow waistcoat, to his Roman adversary, almost indulgently. "What's the meaning of this, sir, eh? Is it burial this time, or is it triumph?"

"Misguided fellows," Mr. Montfort lamented, uneasily watching. "Ignorance, fear, and violence; the first presumes the second and third."

"They come slowly," said another. "They'll go down fast enough."

"With their tails between their legs! Sir Hilary is a magistrate."

Above their talk a petulant question rang clear.

"Mischief? Possibly. In that case, what the devil are we to do with the girl?"

Nobody could answer the question; but since it showed that Sir Hilary took the manifestation seriously

a feeling of vague discomfort grew. Captain de Lannion was speaking in French, to which Sir Hilary listened, frowning; and finally answered:

"Nonsense, Yves. This isn't the Vendée. But she's better out of the way for all that. One of us must get her down to the road. Not you; her uncle will do. Clergyman—he's useless."

He edged his horse nearer to where uncle and niece stood, and disregarding the former, addressed Melian in his civil, unruffled tones, smiling as though he were asking her to dance.

"I fear I must ask you to let Mr. Montfort escort you out of earshot, if you will be so good. I may have a few words to say to these yokels, nothing of importance; but your presence would restrain, whereas your absence would oblige me. May I insist?"

Melian, without a word, put her hand through Mr. Montfort's arm, resting it lightly, so that he should not feel the trembling, and they began to descend the northern slope. As she walked she bit her lip, and bent her head to the humiliation of tears. Here was action; but while her spirit still fronted the southern slope and the advancing crowd, her woman's body, possessed by tremors and misgivings, stepped meekly at her uncle's elbow, longing to run, to hide, no matter where, from the threat of danger. For there was danger; she had read it in the sailor's words, uncomprehended, and the steady watchfulness of his eyes.

She had no ears for her uncle, twittering disquiet at her side.

"I fear," said Mr. Montfort, stumbling down the hillside at a trot, "that the proceedings may not be altogether orderly. If it were only the members of the

Society—but Sir Hilary is the danger. A great pity, regrettable; he is not the man to smooth things over. I have heard that in London he keeps pugilists in his employ; he will think nothing of inciting these poor men to attack. My first duty is to you, my dear, to see you safe; otherwise I should certainly try to deter him. Transportation, that will be the least of it. ‘He hath turned and tossed them violently like a ball into the wide places——’ And before we had got to the heart of the thing! But undeniably I was right. Two circles of stone; we should have come upon the body and weapons at the centre. These impetuous young men!”

He looked round. The invaders had reached the hill-top, and were gathered in front of the open pit and the group of investigators. Above the shifting, ragged fringe which their heads and weapons made against the sky, two silhouettes, those of the horsemen, showed clear-cut and still. Reassured, Mr. Montfort resumed his commentary.

“I do not know this road. The carriage is waiting for us on the other. We may find a path crossing the fields—I think it would be as well, temporarily, to avoid the farm. Are you able to walk, Melian? It may be a mile or so before we come upon a path. The fields just now are too rough for ladies walking. You are not faint, my dear? Had I anticipated—do you find yourself quite strong? They might have hartshorn at the farm; perhaps, after all——”

“I can walk,” said Melian shortly.

She was no longer frightened, now that the threat was past, but she was angry, indignant with her womanhood, the slightly different arrangement of muscle and bone that set her apart in spirit from the assembly on

the hill. During the half-hour of standing there, she had hardly spoken, save to defend herself from the resentment of the gentleman in the yellow waistcoat; she had no rights, and in the open air privileges dwindled. Sir Hilary, when he spoke to her, had the artificial necessary simper, for all the serious matter of his speech. "The ladies, God bless them, and keep them out of the way when there's work to be done," said the simper. Set the lady for an instant within the man's sphere of action, and even the simper disappeared, changed to a blunt question: "What the devil are we to do with the girl?" That slight difference in physical texture meant other differences, of outlook, of thought; it shut a woman away from a great part of life; there were situations that eclipsed her, so that she became, not even a hindrance, but a cypher; nothing at all.

Thinking with angry clearness as she trudged along the farm road sticky with clay, she knew that this consciousness had beset her all the time that she had been upon the hill. She had looked on, listened, taking no part, yet aware and envious of the freemasonry that linked Sir Hilary, carelessly powerful, to Job of the miry breeches, and included even the foreigner, cut off from them by language and custom. No associations of her own sex could offer the equivalent. She had not words to fit her thought to her resentment; she knew, however, dumbly, that women dare not, in this way, take each other for granted. They must be wary in each other's presence. They are individuals all, by reason of that bodily function which marks for them their one duty, leaving them no choice, as men have, of loyalties; a lonely but solitary duty which they must recognise, whether or not they are called to it, and which shapes

their lives from the verge of childhood to that falling away of spirit which is the beginning of age.

"I think," Mr. Montfort was saying, breathlessly, as the mud spurted to his knees, "that on our return to Thrope it would be as well—in fact, I am sure that there had better be no word of all this to your aunt."

Melian came forth from her preoccupation to agree.

III

The path across the fields which they eventually chose did, remarkably for a country path, run directly between the northern and southern roads. But it was dirty, sodden with the trampling of animals' feet, and pond-like in those places where a depression in the soil held yesterday's rain. Melian and her uncle took half an hour to reach its end, and when at last they emerged upon the southern road, a further mile at least lay between them and the carriage. A diffident rain began to fall, and Mr. Montfort, who detested a wetting, stepped out at a good rate. Melian could match this, for they were nearly of a height, but her petticoats, clinging about her legs, checked her at each stride. She lagged behind, and casting a glance along the untenanted road behind them, pulled her skirts to her knees with both hands, and thus untrammelled, easily kept pace. Her uncle saw, and disapproved as decorum demanded, even while he recognised the urgency.

"Fie!" said he, panting. "Melian, Melian, at once drop your skirts! Your knees are exposed."

"If I do," she returned, maintaining her pace, "I can't go fast."

"Well," rejoined her uncle, eyeing her sideways, weighing decorum against a drenching, "but it would

be more fitting, my dear. A public highway——”

Abstractedly he increased his pace so as to bring him a little ahead, which manœuvre afforded him the opportunity of not observing and therefore of ignoring her unladylike course. In this arrangement Melian acquiesced; a yard of space preserved his dignity and gave her freedom of movement. They proceeded swiftly and in silence.

Ten minutes, during which time the rain thickened, brought them to that bend of the road which revealed the carriage, its hospitable pumpkin hood promising shelter. They came towards it running, to find Pompey tethered to a post, munching without relish the short grass of the dyke, and Frank gone. But Mr. Montfort would permit no halt in which to remark on this absence; he thrust Melian into the interior, and himself followed on the very impetus that had sent her forward. Only when they were seated, and he had decanted the water from his shovel hat harmlessly out of one window; when he had, with apologies, taken off his coat, and recommended to Melian the instant removal of her shoes; when he had wrung the water from his scarf, and shaken his head at the total ruin of her bonnet; only then did Mr. Montfort, yearning to be on his way towards a fire, querulously exclaim:

“Why does not Frank come? He had his orders, he should be here. Where can the fellow be?”

Melian spied through her window, bleared with rain, but could see no one. Her uncle confirmed her report with his own eyes, and sat back, adjusting a rug about his shoulders with irritable care.

“At the farm, perhaps,” she suggested.

“Ah, no doubt,” her uncle replied, “by the fire,

most probably. Unjustifiable! If you were to call, my dear——?”

Melian called Frank by name. Her voice was deadened by the swish and patter of the rain, and she knew as she shouted that the farm could never hear.

“A scream,” her uncle recommended impatiently, “something more calculated to attract attention——”

Melian obliged him as she could, but though she shrilled her utmost the farm disclosed no sign of life, the path that led to it and the track beyond the out-buildings showed no figure approaching; a screen of rain hid the summit of the hill. In consternation she and her uncle consulted.

“He is certainly at the farm,” Mr. Montfort decided, “snug in the kitchen. I have noticed at the Rectory how he is forever in the kitchen. There is only one thing to be done.”

He looked wistfully at Melian. A boy of her age could have been despatched long since to summon the delinquent Frank, with jocular phrases regarding milksops if he protested: but young ladies must not be put to such tests; they must, by virtue of their sex, be considered more liable to cold than elderly bookish clergymen. Mr. Montfort sighed, and removing the rug from his shoulders prepared to resume his coat. Melian’s voice halted him.

“There they come,” she said, with the sudden emphasis of discovery.

“They?” inquired Mr. Montfort. “Who are they? Do you see that rascal Frank?”

“Not yet,” she answered, and went on, slowly, “I don’t quite know who they are.”

He almost pushed her from the window, and himself

looked out. Vaguely through the streaky panes he saw a party of men descending the hill, emerging out of the rain by the path they had taken earlier, that led past the farm. He could not distinguish the figures, but a yellow waistcoat glowed bravely, in proximity to the unmistakable curves of Mr. Finn. In the centre of the group two men carried a third. Behind, two others followed, leading a cluster of horses. Despite the rain there was no haste; it was as though the bearers set the pace, going carefully, and picking their steps; but for all that there were jerks and stumbles and with each of these the head of their burden swung to and fro helplessly. As the two in the carriage watched, they reached level ground, quickened step, and soon were lost to sight behind the outbuildings of the farm. Melian over her uncle's shoulder had caught a glimpse, seen enough to question.

"Who was that man, Uncle?"

Mr. Montfort answered with gravity, much troubled:

"I believe it may be Sir Hilary. On his own head——! I could have warned him. If he is killed——"

He paused, leaving in the air visions of lost opportunities, posterity cheated, together with chances of preferment dissolved and quite forgotten. But it seemed very clear that the matter could not be left in the air. He began to shrug his arms into his wet sleeves, to don with a shiver his sodden hat; then with unaccustomed tartness ordering Melian to sit still, set foot upon the mud of the road which he had hoped to tread no more that day.

Melian waited as she was bidden five minutes and no longer. The rain was incessant; nowhere was there any sign of Frank. An impulse seized her. She took off her

useless bonnet, and with the rug over her head like a shawl, set out in her uncle's footsteps.

She made for the front door, but did not knock; instead she tried the latch, slippery to her chilled wet fingers. It yielded, and she found herself alone in a narrow passage closed by a door at its further end. The air of the passage was thick; it smelt of rats and uncleanly food, and a reek of earth and sweat came from a coat hanging on a peg near her shoulder. Voices sounded behind the closed door, engaged in argument, it seemed, and yet hushed. She could distinguish no words, and moved nearer. As if her step had given the signal, a sentence was flung out by the virago of the house, every word of it clear.

"And if he does die, whose'll be the fault? Yours and your likes——"

A murmur answered her, or rather ran through her continued speech.

"—that can't keep from fingering forbidden things. Sir Hilary dead, and a dozen of our lads rotting at Botany, there's your day's work!"

Melian could not go on, could not, though her conscience should charge her with cowardice forever, enter the room dominated by that voice. She was retreating, backwards, making no noise, her eyes fixed upon the door; she had turned to feel for the latch when without warning came a gust of stale odour, a swell of talk, and steps on the stone floor of the passage. She was caught. She dropped against the wall.

"Miss Melian!" said Mr. Finn's voice, and she felt his arm about her waist, "I had forgotten you. Good God, my dear, you should not be here! Eh, captain? She should not be here."

Melian pulled herself together, and with an effort stood upright, away from his arm. The Frenchman was facing her, his steady eyes almost level with her own. She took courage from his presence; no weakness before a foreigner and stranger.

"I came to see," said Melian, nervously smiling, "if I could be of use. Someone is hurt, I saw him being carried here."

"Well, as to that," said Mr. Finn doubtfully, "I don't know that you can do anything. He has had a knock——"

"Sir Hilary?"

"Yes, more fool he; and we must get him home. He can't sit a horse. We are off, Captain de Lannion and I, to find some kind of carriage. But you—what are we to do with you?"

He looked past her, and through the open door at the scene, which the firelight made more sinister; the brass barrel of a gun upon the wall; the restless pendulum of a clock; a woman's hand extended in gesticulation, claw-like; and on the table a man's body lying flat, the brow darkened by a triangular wound. The woman's voice came again.

"A bastard and whoremaster that lawful-gotten sons must swing for——"

Expostulations rose and covered her voice, as sea lashed by wind will rise, thunderous, to a power in which the wind is overwhelmed. Suddenly a stream of rain ran in under the door towards Melian's feet, halted, and widened to a pool.

"You can't stay here," said Mr. Finn, "and you can't go out into that."

He pulled at his ear in despair, and continued:

"And your old pussy-cat of an uncle coming up here nosing into murder! Why couldn't you both stay dry in the carriage?"

Melian interrupted, standing erect, her eyes brilliant with the thought that had just come to her.

"The carriage!" said she, gladly. "Our carriage, for Sir Hilary. Frank shall drive him to Mawdry."

Mr. Finn lost his look of humorous despair, and clapped her shoulder.

"That's it," said Mr. Finn, "good girl! That saves us time. Do you hear, captain? Mr. Montfort's carriage ready to hand. You have more sense than any of us. Wait; I'll speak to them——"

He strode away towards the kitchen, leaving her with De Lannion. She asked at once:

"What happened?"

She was prepared for shrugs, volubility, the traditional exuberance of the Frenchman; but De Lannion did not move to answer, and his voice was deliberate, as though the English flowed uneasily.

"The cause," he began, "I don't understand very well—these men came up. They threatened. They pulled their spades from the two men, would not let them go on. Talk, a great deal of talk, then; but the peasants were angry. I have seen something of that."

The Revolution, Melian wondered? Probably, for he seemed, now that she was close to him, quite old; forty-five or more. He went on:

"Sir Hilary laughed at them; he said something—I could not hear it. There was a stone thrown, and he fell."

"Will he die?"

He shook his head decisively. She was silent for a half-minute, then asked:

"If the digging had stopped, why did they throw the stone?"

"He mocked them," De Lannion answered, "laughed—offered himself a mark for them. Not wise, that, mademoiselle."

Mr. Finn and Mr. Montfort were returning, talking together.

"Certainly, by all means," Mr. Montfort was saying in tones of unconvincing enthusiasm, "the best thing to be done. But what of Melian? This place is not fitting——"

"She can sit in the carriage with Sir Hilary and the surgeon."

"To Mawdry, a young lady alone!"

"One of the Mawdry carriages will take her back to Thrope. And for your comfort I may say," Mr. Finn added with a half smile, "that Sir Hilary is at present in no condition to harm any woman."

But Mr. Montfort would not be easy.

"I cannot let her go alone—her aunt——"

"Ride Sir Hilary's horse, then, and keep her company. Now, my good friend, do not waste time." Then, to the girl, with a kindly hand at her arm: "You, Miss Melian; can you face a drive of six or seven miles with a sick man? Without any fainting or nonsensical tricks?" She nodded, and he clapped her shoulder. "Of course you can. Be off to the carriage. The sooner you start the better."

He was not to be resisted. Mr. Montfort's complaints found no lodgment. There was a bustle, a trampling of

feet in the kitchen; Sir Hilary, unconscious still and limp as a doll, was hoisted upon the crossed hands of two men; the antiquaries followed. Of the assailants, the twenty-odd men who had offered armed resistance to the whim of a magistrate, nothing was to be seen, they had escaped, she hoped. But a glimpse of Sir Hilary's deathly face told her that the matter could not go without inquiry; there would be soldiers, perhaps, or special commissions sent to punish. She shivered, going out in the wake of the bearers into the rain, hearing the voice of the farmer's wife, savagely insistent at their backs.

"Get him home to his own place, and wash your hands after. There's muckier things than blood."

De Lannion shut the door on the sound, frowning as though he beheld ugly memories rising; as though he too were of opinion that there could be in the world things uglier and more unclean than blood.

CHAPTER FIVE

MAWDRY

I

THE drive to Mawdry was accomplished in some three quarters of an hour, during which time Melian sat with her back to the horse, balanced on a tiny seat, while Sir Hilary sprawled across the rest of the carriage, his head supported by the shoulder of the gentleman in the yellow waistcoat, who now appeared in his true colours as the lesser surgeon of Pliny. Sir Hilary lay without movement; the surgeon was fully occupied protecting his patient from the jolts and accidents of the road; and Melian found herself condemned once more, but with thankfulness, to nonentity. There was no talk. Once she asked the time; the surgeon, pulling out Sir Hilary's watch, answered that it was half after five. They arrived at the gates of Mawdry without more words.

Horsemen had preceded them with news of misfortune, the gates stood open, and the lodge-keeper looked anxiously out from his door. Under the portico which sheltered the main entrance to the house men-servants waited, and were stirred to activity at sight of the carriage coming towards them at Pompey's best pace. It drew up. Melian stepped out first, and was hurried up the steps by an elderly man, the butler. Footmen ran forward with the couch which had been prepared for Sir Hilary, and stood by the wheels while the surgeon and one of their number tenderly lifted

him, conscious now, but still deathly limp and pale. Melian had no time to see more. Almost at once she was in the hall, standing bewildered in a twilight made by the panelling, through which gleamed armour, and the faces and hands of portraits; among them Sir Hilary himself, unmistakable, looked down from the turn of the stairs. The servant made a gesture towards one of the tall, dark chairs, and hastened out again to his master. Melian took a step or two forward, but was checked by a scurry and clack of feet on the staircase. She looked up and saw two women, one magnificent, with coiled black hair, the other evidently by her dress a maid. The magnificent one, sweeping towards Melian, addressed her without ceremony, in a half-shriek:

“Where is he? Let me come to him. What have you done with him?”

Melian stammered, and turned towards the door, through which the couch with its burden was being manœuvred; the lady, observing this, uttered a kind of sobbing cry, and ran past Melian with wild grace, holding out hands on which, even in that light, the diamonds glittered frostily. Her approach halted the cortège, and she was able to kneel in superb abandon, her cheeks against one fallen hand, her lips imploring:

“Speak to me, Hilary! He’s dead, they’ve killed him, he doesn’t answer me. Hilary, speak to your Laura!”

She gathered him strongly in her arms, and would have drawn his head upon her bosom, but the surgeon intervened, and Melian could have smiled to hear the words and tone with which he endeavoured to compel the lady to silence.

“Restrain yourself, madam! Have a little care. Do not be so violent, madam!”

A request followed that she should rise, and permit Sir Hilary to be carried to his room, a request which could not make its way through the cries of the lady, in which, so it seemed to Melian, grief had no great part. She felt a hand on her arm. The maid was speaking.

"If you will come this way, miss, there's things laid out dry for you."

Melian, still gazing at the scene by the door, asked: "Is that Sir Hilary's lady?"

"You may say so, miss," the woman answered, looking strangely at her; and stood aside to let her pass first up the stairs.

They took the right wing of the staircase where it branched, and entered a small room with light walls and a modern window. Here on the bed, garments were spread, fine and delicate things, a wealth of lawn and silk and lace to choose from. Hot water waited, too, brushes and a comb, toilet waters, and a mirror which showed clearly her instant need of all these things. The maid, having admitted her, waited, making Melian feel conscious of her untidiness, the country quality of her clothes; she could not undress beneath that supercilious eye. She summoned her aunt's manner to her aid.

"You need not wait."

"But your wet clothes, miss——" the maid protested.

"I will ring for you."

"Your hair——"

"I prefer to dress it myself."

The woman still stared, still stood. Melian added, with a last flicker of courage:

"I have everything I need. I am greatly obliged to Lady Pomfret."

She faced the mirror, that incorruptible witness to her complexion's overthrow and the disorder of her hair; it reflected, in addition to these, the face of the maid, on which a silent and contemptuous laugh seemed to be dying. In an instant it was gone. She retired, the door was closed, and Melian was left alone to contemplate the embroidered stuffs so prodigally lent for her wearing, and to decipher as best she might the twined initials on the backs of the silver brushes; she found an L., and, as she thought, a D.; however, the letters were so ornamented and flourished that no certainty was possible.

II

She was dressed in a crimson robe that looked warm, and was the least unsuited, of the three or four offered, to a slow drive through rain on an April evening; but for all its strong colour it was frail, and she was glad to feel the illusory weight of a gauze scarf upon her shoulders. The mirror, which had recorded a girl with dark hair tousled in gipsy fashion, now approved a radiant and elegant lady, who moved back and forth, leant sideways to her own profile, preened and paraded for ten minutes after the last hook was in place. There being no other excuse to linger, she pulled the bell for the maid as she had promised and, standing by the window, waited, looking out on trees misted with green, and distant sheltering cattle, with eyes to which the insistent beat of her heart forbade understanding. Minutes went by, and it became clear that the bell would not be answered. She returned to the mirror, inquiring of her reflection what she should do. She might ring once more; she might wait till someone

remembered her existence; she might go downstairs and herself seek her uncle, whom she had last seen fearfully urging Sir Hilary's horse, on to whose back, a guiltless Mazeppa, the enthusiasm of Mr. Finn had conveyed him. This choice of counsel the mirror offered, together with a compliment or two; and among the three, impulse decided.

She opened the door, and stepped out into the gallery. Hence, leaning on the rail, she could see no person in the hall, though from behind tall doors to the right came voices, and the sound of a pianoforte, with an occasional burst of laughter, cut short as though a warning hand had been lifted, and a sudden memory of the sick man struck across gaiety. Melian came forward, hesitating, to the staircase, and descended a few steps, listening. The door opened as she stood there, and a voice she knew said:

"I'm not a stranger, and these servants are imbeciles. She cannot be aware of the hour."

It was Mr. Jefferey Galliard, as the voice foretold, who came stepping across the hall, pausing at the foot of the stairs to make sure of the set of his waistcoat, and to caress with one hand, lightly, the wave of hair above his forehead. Satisfied that his appearance did not fall beneath its wonted perfection he mounted, and took the turn which brought him to Melian; saw her in all the new dignity of her dress, and was startled; his first exclamation confessed as much.

"By the Lord——"

It was a tribute. Having paid it, he continued:

"The drawing-room awaits you, Miss Forster. Mrs. Dest has prevailed with your uncle to dine before you set out for Thrope, and it is now after five. But"—his

practised eye surveyed and approved her—"you have spent your time profitably."

Melian, already shy, was confused by this suggestion that the company waited for her. The feeling of security, which for a time the dress had afforded, became a thing of small account, since her borrowed plumes must be worn under the eye of the lender, a stranger. All those assembled to watch her entry were strangers save Mr. Galliard and her uncle. She shrank inwardly, while her steps echoed those of Mr. Galliard on the polished oak, and her voice responded calmly with regrets for the delay.

They came to the tall doors; it was the moment. Mr. Galliard stood aside, faintly bowing her to precede him, and with a quick nervous step she entered alone, bringing the talk down to a hush as the company turned to watch her. She advanced with credit, for all the fear in her heart, Mr. Galliard following with a smirk and the proprietary walk of one having a right to show off her paces.

III

The white and gold saloon was not, after all, so tremendous, nor were there so many persons gathered about the fire as she had feared; one lady only, the magnificent one—who, then, was Mrs. Dest?—her uncle, looking different and ill at ease, a middle-aged man with one sleeve pinned across his coat, a young man with a combative face, whose bearing had nothing of the soldier; last, in a blue uniform whose wide lapels were edged with tarnished gold, De Lannion, standing a little apart, as he had stood apart from that scene on the hill-top. The lady, graceful in tranquillity as she had

been in agitation, came forward, forestalling Melian's apology with one of her own.

"Am I forgiven, Miss Forster? I had nothing to say to you half an hour ago. You must excuse me. My anxiety—Sir Hilary and I are such old friends." With a lift of her fan she dismissed the wild appearance, the cries, of half an hour ago, and continued, beckoning the men to attention:

"Let me present these gentlemen; they are agog to meet you—the heroine of a rising! Major Pardie——"

The gentleman with the empty sleeve bowed.

"Mr. Quilter——"

The combative young man bowed.

"Captain de Lannion—but you are old acquaintances. We have heard from him of your courage."

Melian, dazzled by the lady's appearance—for she was beautiful, Hera with Aphrodite's eyes—could find nothing better to answer than:

"I think I was only in the way."

"But you drove Sir Hilary home. You bore with courage the sight of that terrible wound——"

She shuddered, and brought a sparkling hand to cover her eyes.

"I cannot bear to witness pain, or to think of it."

She recovered, with a gallant smile, from the distress into which the recollection of her sensibility had plunged her, and went on:

"But the introductions are not over. You do not yet know my name. I am Mrs. Dest, an old, a very old friend of Sir Hilary."

Brilliantly she smiled, and slowly swayed her fan, her eyes fixed on those of the girl; the hand holding the fan moved like the head of a snake balanced to strike.

Melian, however, made no such comparison. She was at a loss. There was, then, no Lady Pomfret; and yet—"Is that Sir Hilary's lady?" "You may call her so." They were to be married, perhaps? She heard her uncle's greetings, and laughter at the sight of him banished perplexity. He wore a green foppish coat and white breeches, from the wardrobe of Mrs. Finn's nephew: they were both of a height. It was no very conspicuous coat, a gentlemanly affair, but its wearer's mien endowed it with the villainy of a domino and mask flaunted at Carnival. He had, however, contrived to mitigate its smartness by means of his own white clerical neckcloth, crumpled still and not innocent of mud; he fingered this, and seemed to take comfort from it.

"Well, my dear," said Mr. Montfort with a poor semblance of gaiety, "you and I have played truant for once. I do not like to think of your aunt's anxiety."

Melian knew in which sense this was true. She consoled him, and learned that a servant had been despatched on horseback to Thrope, to give all news; this was satisfactory, but still he shook his head, moved his shoulders uneasily in the green coat, and regarded Mrs. Dest, now speaking, with mingling disapproval and fear. The events of the afternoon were still being discussed.

"They will transport the wretches, of course," said she.

"Waste of ship-room," Mr. Galliard decided. "Better a file of soldiers, and a firing party."

"Waste of lead," returned Mrs. Dest swiftly.

There was laughter.

"They are to go free, then, because punishment costs money?" asked Mr. Quilter, the scorn in his voice a tattered cloak for irony.

"We should not grudge extravagance in a good

cause," answered Mr. Galliard, gravely. "I'll give half-a-guinea towards a rope."

"And I, towards a guillotine," said Mr. Quilter.

"You are out of date, my friend," Mr. Galliard airily reproved him, "démodé, quite."

"Like the clothes of the Revolution; yet they were delicious," said Mrs. Dest. "Think of old prints; the striped stuffs—the hats. I will subscribe to Quilter's guillotine. It sets fantasy free."

"Other things besides," said Mr. Quilter drily, "a trifle, for instance, such as the soul of a nation. France was bound; the triangular knife cut through her chains. Blood—what is blood? Without blood there can be no birth."

He paused for breath, and in the interval came Mr. Montfort's thin voice, opposing its frail barrier to impropriety.

"My dear Melian, I wish I could think that you had not taken cold. That scarf—is it sufficient?"

"Blood," continued Mr. Quilter loudly, "is fertility. When the flow ceases, a woman is sterile; a nation, likewise."

"Have we not been twenty years at war?" Mrs. Dest asked; the poking of a stick between the bars, as she well knew. Mr. Quilter responded, turning upon her, raging:

"War! A struggle of children to set one dirty rag above another. Blood, precious, salutary blood, spilled to buy stars for bullies and garters for harlots—all this, by proxy. No, no. It should be poured out by a people upon its own hearthstone, a libation, an offering to liberty. When that has been done with all reverence as a duty, the gods at last may look down."

Mr. Montfort, watching Melian's eye grow wide, was to be pitied. They were enclosed in a circle; there was no way by which he could defend her ears and his own against the abomination. As a Christian, he knew his duty; as a man moving in a certain society he knew it. As a clergyman dependent on a patron, standing before that patron's fire, he could not rebuke that patron's friend: as a gentleman he could not insult a drawing-room and the presence of ladies by any serious intervention. His trouble, as he waited for the worse which was to follow, was beyond the power of any neckcloth to allay.

"For what," the unheeding orator pursued, "is the cross? What meaning does it hold? The people's souls were saved by it once, the parsons tell them. But now their souls are dead. Their bodies live; and those only the knife can save. Give them the knife, then, for symbol. Let them adore that. Let them pray to it." In his too-bright eyes gleamed the sword's grey sheen. "I can imagine no act more noble than for a man to strip himself naked, and lifting his eyes to the knife, beseech it—'Pure steel, keep my integrity; bright steel, keep me vigilant; cold steel, strengthen my heart against thine enemies, though they be of my own house!' Is not this the only prayer befitting a man?"

He ceased, glaring. There was a burst of ironical clapping from three pairs of hands. Melian, distressed, sought De Lannion's eyes, and found him considering the speaker with a hard and contemptuous expression that contrasted with his impassive pose. Mrs. Dest, too, had observed this, and thrust a teasing sentence in his direction.

"Captain de Lannion shall say if we are to believe

you. Tell us, is bloodshed such an entrancing spectacle? You have seen, have you not, Saint Guillotine at play?"

De Lannion bowed slightly.

"Madam, yes. As a young man, at Nantes. And heads of my family beneath it."

Those words struck their hearers to decent silence, which broke into nervous talk only with the announcement that dinner was served.

IV

The dinner passed amid a rustle of talk. The fruit was being handed to Melian, seated between Mr. Galliard and the one-armed man. Said the former:

"Miss Forster, will you entrust your peach to me? Pray permit me. You will soil your fingers, make them sticky——"

"You see, Miss Forster, I do not offer. I have had no civility for ladies since Portugal. A whole man may make a monkey of himself, and it passes. A cripple dare not; he is one already. His best course is to keep quiet. You will forgive me."

"Oh, but a wounded officer is a hero. Nobody minds—everybody must respect him."

"Respect? That depends. Deuced heroic, no doubt, to fall off a horse—worse, a mule—and break an arm on a Portuguese cobblestone. And running away, into the bargain, from a pack of Junot's cuirassiers. The Government gave me no medal, not even a brevet, for my exploit. That surprises you? Men have had peerages for less."

"I do not like to hear you talk so. I wish we might have the true story."

"There is no more. A fall from a mule, in full flight—and, as I said, a cobblestone. It was dark; the pursuers followed the beat of hoofs. I kept quiet as they passed, perforce, since I had fallen on my head. A week later an army surgeon with a saw deprived me of the power of being serviceable to ladies. I think your peach is ready."

His nod dismissed her. She turned to her other partner.

"What is the true story of Major Pardie's wound, Mr. Galliard? He is engaged now with my uncle; you may safely tell me."

But there was a *bon mot* to come first.

"Your peach, madam. Its blushes have been taken off for convenience, like those of a lady of fashion. His wound? I imagine the tale to be pretty much as he tells it."

"Ran away? An English officer?"

"You think it is only Frenchmen who run?"

Mr. Galliard smiled, having an extensive hearsay knowledge of armies at war.

"The French seamen, my brother says, are great fighters."

"Ah, the seamen." He set down his glass. "Well, the wind should take most credit there. If it is contrary they cannot get out of the way; and if they cannot get out of the way, they may as well fight."

Melian attempted sarcasm.

"You do not like sailors, I believe. You do not think them well-dressed enough to be worth your notice."

"You are too severe," grievously Mr. Galliard answered. "Sailors and soldiers are a very good kind of men; but as for their bravery, which ladies commend

so, it is their livel hood. They are paid to let themselves be shot at, like a man I saw once at a fair."

"You, at a fair! That was not very elegant."

Looking rather shamefaced, he answered: "I was ten years old. Well, at this fair I saw a man leaping up and down in a barrel, to be shied at with wooden balls, seven a penny. This is your sailor. He leaps up and down in his tarry wooden hulk for twopence a day, while others as silly as he let fly at him."

"But that is ignoble, a man to make himself a target for money!"

Mr. Galliard replied composedly:

"Then sailors are ignoble, for that is what they do."

Irritated, but unable to let the matter drop, Melian insisted:

"But they serve their country—your man in the barrel does not do that."

"They would serve it better," Mr. Galliard answered, "by staying at home, eating a good deal, and buying a new coat once a fortnight. The more food is eaten, the better for the farmers. As to the coat, it is money into three or four pockets—tailor, weaver, thread-maker, button-maker that is, if you pay for it."

"That would be very heroic, just to stay at home and eat. You leave us nobody to be proud of."

"I would have heroes confined to novels, which is their rightful place. In real life the nation must continually be going to war to provide them with opportunities, which is all mightily expensive and troublesome. I would lock up any person that showed any presence of mind whatever in the face of danger. In a year or two all the firebrands would be in irons, and the rest of us could be comfortable."

"You will not be serious."

"Certainly not," replied he, with a shocked expression, "I know what is due to ladies."

"Yes," said Melian, "and it is that, I believe, which angers me."

"You are angry? What have I said?" Mr. Galliard implored.

She knew that it was absurd to care, absurd to treat him as a sensible person; still she went on:

"I do not like to be treated—laughed at—because I am not a man, you are expected to talk nonsense to me."

"I will talk how you please. Do not be offended. I assure you——"

But she had done with him; even her uncompromising neighbour was better worth while.

"Major Pardie," she began, point-blank, "will you tell me about a battle?"

"What battle, madam?" he inquired, with an eager look that showed him glad to talk, despite his bitter words.

"You must have been in a great many. I do not mind which."

"I have been in as few as I could," said he, returning to his former manner. "As for describing them, I have not eyes in the back of my head."

"Do not you tease me, too."

He looked sharply at her, and saw that she was distressed.

"What, has Galliard been clever? They are all clever here. It is a monkey-house; I loathe the chatter."

"Why do you stay in it?" she asked, unthinking.

"Because I have no other roof," he answered, "and cannot earn one. There is no work for the men who

fought. It is not to be wondered at. They learned rough ways in the army, not suitable for office stools. And who will take half a man, do you think, when he can get a whole one for the same money?"

"It is horrible to hear you talk. I am very sorry."

"Thank you," said he, without irony; then, again resuming his humour: "Pity we can always count on, even from the politicians; it costs nothing and looks well. I ask your pardon, you must excuse me, Miss Forster. I forgot myself, I ask pardon."

"Do not," said she instantly. "I would rather hear you talk than Mr. Galliard."

"Galliard is a monkey. I am a bear. There is not much to choose between us that I can see."

She asked, curiously, not looking in the direction her question indicated:

"Captain de Lannion, what is he?"

"A man. Out of place in the monkey-house."

"And Mrs. Dest?"

"A woman," answered Major Pardie, very briefly.

"She is looking to you, I think."

Indeed, Mrs. Dest was swaying forward, gathering skirts, rising.

"Miss Forster, shall we leave these gentlemen to entertain each other? They will manage very well, with help from the decanters."

But Mr. Montfort, nervously fingering his neck-cloth—he had been sitting next to Mr. Quilter—rose too.

"I for one must not stay, madam. Mrs. Montfort—my wife will be anxious. We have some distance to travel."

"Sir Hilary will not have his wine insulted. Ten minutes at least you owe it."

"Willingly," Mr. Montfort answered, in reluctance's very voice, "if I had only to answer for myself, but I am anxious for my niece, to have her safe home."

"Are we so dangerous?" Mrs. Dest's bright eyes inquired of the table. "What have you been saying, gentlemen? I am afraid that once or twice you forgot Mr. Montfort's cloth."

"It is Galliard's cloth," Mr. Quilter mocked. "We owe that no respect."

"True," said Mrs. Dest, with a laugh. "You must blame your borrowed coat, sir, for any lack of reverence. But if you are really anxious——"

"Indeed, indeed I am," he answered piteously, surveying his incongruous legs.

"Then I will not keep you. I will order the horses; and you shall be informed when they are waiting. Will you come, Miss Forster?"

Melian, half-shyly, one hand upon a carved chair-back, curtseyed.

"Then I wish you good-evening, gentlemen, and good-bye."

"Mademoiselle."

"Good-bye."

Dutifully the ladies, with a rustle of silk, left the gentlemen to their wine.

v

For some reason lamps had not been lit in the hall, which Mrs. Dest and Melian had to cross to reach the saloon. Melian must have blundered among the tables, armoured figures, and screens, but that Mrs. Dest put a strong feverish hand at her elbow to guide.

"Servants do their best to make disaster infectious.

Poor Sir Hilary's head will excuse neglect and idleness for a week to come. Do you not think——”

The hand gripped Melian's elbow with a sudden strength that pulled her to a standstill; the voice asked, almost in a whisper:

“What noise was that, outside?”

“The carriage,” Melian, wondering, answered. “I am afraid I must borrow a cloak——”

“Your carriage is not yet ordered. Who can this be?”

The shadowed hall echoed to a double knock, that made the grip of the hand increase its tension almost to pain; so holding, so held, they moved on towards the tall doors, and together stepped into the warm living light of candles. In this safety, the hand relaxed, and quitted Melian's elbow, not abruptly, but with a smooth habitual motion as of stroking. In just such a manner did Mrs. Dest ply her fan, take up her glass, break her bread, with movements exquisitely rounded and controlled, each to its end. When she spoke again it was lightly.

“I am nervous this evening. This is the surgeon's boy, no doubt, with a cargo of fresh plasters. Sit down, and be warm. We may leave your uncle, I think, to the wine for a few minutes longer. Then you shall have your cloak, if you insist. But it would be better if you did not set out to-night, after the strain of this shocking experience.”

She appeared to be talking a little at random, listening to the hurry of servants' footsteps, which the double knock had summoned.

“Were you not greatly alarmed?”

“I saw nothing of the stone-throwing. I had no cause to be frightened.”

"Ah, country nerves. One must pay for an existence in town. Do you live always in the country?"

"Since I was six."

"No London? No journeys? Fortunate girl! You may keep your complexion. But then what use is a blush unseen? So things are balanced."

Mrs. Dest did not sit, though she had gestured Melian to a chair. She stood by the fire, one elbow supported by the mantel, in the very attitude and shape of a figure carved on the marble which her bosom warmed. It seemed to Melian that she was possessed by some apprehension which showed itself, like that of an animal, in utter stillness. She talked on, and through her own words listened, though not to Melian's answers.

"I should have fainted. Anything in the nature of violence is abhorrent to me. One has heard from De Lannion something of these peasant risings."

"Did he—did his family suffer?"

"The mother escaped, I believe, with a younger boy. Their château was burned."

"Château?"

"Oh, the old talk of noblesse. All have castles, all are counts. A title is the emigré's excuse for deserting his country; he must preserve himself for the sake of his posterity. It is their translation of *noblesse oblige*——"

She broke off, openly listening now to the confusion in the hall. Argument was in progress between some servant and an imperious visitor. The servant's words, low-spoken, did not reach their ears; the gentleman's statements and questions were entirely audible.

"I don't wish to know about Sir Hilary. I have nothing to say to him. Pity they didn't break his neck. Answer my question."

A murmur.

"That's a lie. I know she's here, and I'll see her."

A murmur.

"I'm a magistrate myself. If any one of these louts lays a finger on me I'll see that he gets seven years for it. No more talk of putting me out by force. Now, then. Where is this lady?"

A murmur.

"I've no intention of disturbing Sir Hilary, unless your damned obstinacy obliges me. If I don't get an answer I'll disturb the whole house. Ah, that's better. I thought you'd see reason. Which way? No, don't announce me. Here——"

The door of the saloon opened, and a tall man wearing a caped driving-coat stood frowning in. For a second, over his shoulder, Melian saw the face of the butler, frightened and questioning, before the door was roughly closed. Mrs. Dest did not turn or move. She leaned her face upon her hand in a graceful and indolent pose; even with the firelight upon it her cheek held no more colour than the stone. The intruder offered no greeting, but spoke to her directly:

"I knew. I was certain."

She did not stir as she answered: "Anything you please, but in private. There is a lady in this room whose presence you have not yet acknowledged."

The intruder became aware of Melian for the first time, and surveyed her as he stripped off his gloves. She, hardly capable of surprise at this last astonishing episode of an eventful day, returned his look. He was old, she saw, older than De Lannion, but spare and very upright; grey-haired; pale. The black brows drawn down upon his eyes could not hide the fury that raged there.

He bowed a little, biting at his lips. Melian dipped. Mrs. Dest, the colour creeping once more into her face, watched them both, and from their embarrassment drew confidence. She spoke to the intruder in the ordinary tone of any hostess, as though he had been a contented and invited guest.

"Will you not join the other gentlemen? They have not yet left the dining-room. A glass of wine—you must have driven far."

"No," said he, disconcerted. "I'll have nothing."

"You disdain refreshment; then there is nothing left but conversation," she answered, and slowly sank into a chair. "Do you find the roads in good condition coming from London?"

He did not answer, but stood there in front of her, his anger barely within control; awkward with excess of rage and other primitive emotions inconsistent with the precision of a drawing-room. Melian would have left them gladly, but there was no escape by means of the door. He straddled in the way, a very Apollyon. The voice of Mrs. Dest came clear:

"And have you been very gay lately in town? Let us hear something of the dissipations of civil life. There is nothing to talk of in these parts but a little blood-letting."

Silence. She laughed, and gathered Melian into the affair with her glance, the hostess doing her best with a pair of difficult guests; the accomplished singer disguising by her own virtuosity the faults of an accompanist.

"You will neither explain yourself, nor drink wine, nor converse. I am at a loss to imagine why you should have come."

He swallowed as though some bitterness were in his mouth, and began deliberately to pull on his discarded gloves.

"Must you go so soon?" said she, observing. "But what of our talk in private? Do not cheat me of that; I have most delicious anticipations."

Melian felt her heart begin to beat as she realised what Mrs. Dest was doing. She was using her, Melian, as a shield, from behind whose shelter she could send out her shafts of defiance. With this presence for security, she baited the intruder; six strong men could not have protected her from violence or reproach so surely as this silent girl.

"I believe," said Mrs. Dest, swaying her fan with a hand that shook no longer, "I believe you have forsaken me and are come to confess it. You are weary of me, you find my caprices tolerable no longer. I am dismissed like a housemaid, that is your message that you have driven so fast and so far to deliver; dismissed your friendship without a character. How shall I live?"

Again she laughed while he stared, smouldering, at his gloves; and wooed him to answer.

"Is it not so? No wonder the confession would be private. Ah, shame!"

Above her fan she began to sing very softly:

"Oh, never leave me,

Oh, don't deceive me!

How could you use a poor maiden so?"

And continued the tune without words, humming and smiling at her audience, like a cat with a fresh mouse between her paws that will show much sport yet.

He had drawn on only one of his gloves, the left;

the other he held, beating his left palm gently with it from time to time as he listened. Mrs. Dest watched this revealing motion, and took her tempo from it as though it had been a conductor's wand. She gave him a moment's respite, left her tune, and changed to the spoken word once more.

"I had relied on Sir Hilary. Poor man! A broken reed now. I have a kind of affection for him; he is the very epitome of a gentleman. No extravagance in action, much in expenditure. How different from—shall we say, a merchant?—since 'tradesman' has an unbecoming sound."

For the first time he moved, took impetuous steps to bring him nearer to her chair, and for the first time in many minutes spoke.

"Are you saying now that I grudged you money? You had money to burn. I slung the price of a regiment's greatcoats round your neck once."

"Did you? I am glad to know the cost of my necklace. Sir Hilary does not confide these interesting details of his gifts."

"You call me tradesman. Well, you, too, have something for sale. Tradesman; that being so, I am not held by rules of gentlemanly conduct."

He came nearer, and the moving fan halted for a moment in mid-arc. The eye above it grew bright and hard. She had gone too far; there was danger, after all. But her voice was steady.

"You will beat me, sir, is that it? All very well in private; there, to be expected. But we have a witness—her illusions in regard to tradesmen it is surely your duty to preserve."

It was too late. Under the sting of her tone he started

forward, and slashed the right-hand glove twice, three times across her face, that the feathers and frail sticks of tortoiseshell could hardly defend. Blood sprang from a cut by her mouth and trickled slowly to her chin; the red trace of the blows was instantly visible. He drew back and laughed.

"The last gift you'll get from me, madam," said he. "Thank God, I am rid of a whore."

He turned, and Melian, rising, met him with a cry.

"You coward!"

She stood in front of him, her hands clenched, her whole being filled with horror of him, and indignation for the silent woman who sat holding a handkerchief to her mouth.

"Out of my way, young lady," roughly said the intruder, "you have seen what does not concern you. It was not my wish. Stand aside. I am going, my business here is done."

"Coward!" the girl repeated, as though she had not heard. The remembered brutality of the action set her tongue stammering, but did not check it.

"Her face is bleeding. You have hurt her. We are women, but there are men here. You shall not go scot-free——"

She caught at the bell rope and jerked it twice before he pulled her hand away, and laughed again to feel the slender wrist writhe against his hold, helpless to loose itself.

"You meddling child!" said he. "Will you make a scandal? What good can that do?"

She ceased to struggle, and stood passively, while he held her wrist and spoke to her firmly, without emotion.

"I regret the scene—that you should have witnessed it, not what I did. And I give you warning that you may expect many such scenes if you remain in such company."

With a quick movement he turned her towards the light, closely scanning her.

"What part do you play here? You are too young. What do you do here, with those frank eyes, in this hot-house? Have you no parents, guardians, to see that you keep with decent women?"

Gently he shook her wrist. She answered defiantly:

"I am old enough, at least, to know how gentlemen behave."

He let her go, but still scanned her face, puzzled by something in it, familiar, remembered. She went on, rating him:

"You need not apologise to me. You need not care for me at all. Pray do not trouble to give me advice."

He heard this childish apostrophe with a half-smile, and shrugged his caped shoulders as he answered:

"You have spirit and looks, and are a country girl, by your skin. Well, you are not to blame if you bring your goods to the nearest market. But it sickens me to think of those eyes in ten years' time."

For the first moment she did not understand. When she had guessed at his meaning, by the tone rather than the words' significance, red flooded her face as though in response to such a slash as had set Mrs. Dest's lip bleeding. For the first time in her life a passion, resentment, mastered her completely; all codes, all training, were forgotten. She clenched her hand and drove it with all her strength at the side of his jaw as he turned; no slap, but a blow that caught him off his balance and

sent him staggering a step or two sideways. It shook an oath out of him before he recovered and faced her; they stood opposed, motionless, she breathing fast, he as though breath had ceased. The watcher, seeing their two faces drawn taut with the strain of a similar emotion, widened her eyes to a question asked and in the same instant answered. A tap at the door, coming at this moment, sounded unnaturally loud. They had forgotten the ringing of the bell.

It was Mrs. Dest who spoke to the waiting servant:

"Is Mr. Montfort's carriage ready?"

"I believe so, madam."

A new expression crept into the eyes of the intruder still fixed on Melian.

"What?" said he, incredulous; and repeated more loudly: "What name do you say?"

But Mrs. Dest was occupied with the servant.

"Have it to the door at once and inform Mr. Montfort. He is with the gentlemen."

"He is here, madam."

The man stood aside to permit the entrance of Mr. Montfort, still gay in his white and green, and went out, closing the door.

"Melian, Melian," said her uncle pettishly, "what are you doing? Where is your cloak? We have lost a deal of time already."

He caught sight of the intruder, and stepped back in amazement, his hand at his neck-cloth. The other, slowly reckoning the incongruities of face and costume by which he was confronted, laughed and extended a hand.

"Well, Simon," said he, "since when have you taught dancing? Where is your fiddle?"

Mr. Montfort, looking piteously down at his frivolous attire, answered in haste:

"Borrowed, borrowed. My own clothes were saturated. But you—what do you here? And what——"

"Simon," said the other, disregarding, "I think you had better make me known to my daughter."

Before he spoke Melian knew; his words came as the confirmation, the echo of her own knowledge. She put her hands over her face with the angular gesture of a child, and stood up, while her uncle hurried on and her father regarded her with something like compassion.

"I do not understand it," Mr. Montfort was saying. "I am altogether at a loss, Horatio. What brings you here? Have you seen Julia? Do you come from Thrope?"

"Let it alone," said Forster impatiently. "Will you give me a bed for the night? We can talk in the morning."

"I am delighted, Julia will be delighted, but—could you not have warned us? A small household—easily deranged. Melian, my dear, what is this? In tears, you?"

"No," she answered, and took her hands from her face, showing it pale, but unstained, unswollen. "Is that man my father?"

"Have you been talking all this time and not discovered it?" said her uncle, looking from one to the other, nervously laughing. "It is like one of these novels they bring out by the score nowadays; trashy things. Certainly, my dear, it is your father, and he is to blame if you are too much overcome to take it in. Ten years—longer since you saw him! He should have sent word of his intention, we should have been prepared, all would have been in order. Now——"

He looked askance down at his coat of unaccustomed colour. Mrs. Dest, unobserved, drew nearer to the drama, and leant once more by the fire, spectator-in-chief. She said nothing; the flame between father and daughter was high, and needed no stirring.

"That man!" said Melian again, and shivered.

"Come," said her father, "do not play Miss Sensibility with me. We want no fine scenes. Forget, if you can, what has happened, and I, too, will forget it."

"You struck her. You called her——"

She faltered at the word. He took her up.

"I called an evil woman by her right name. What can you tell of the ins and outs of the matter? God knows, I did not expect to find my daughter in such society. If you walk in the gutter, you will hear gutter talk; make up your mind to that. And since your uncle has so little care for you, I see it is time I took a hand."

"I won't go with you."

"We'll see. What did you ask in your letter?"

"I'm sorry I wrote it. I meant none of it."

"I put the letter by. For the moment I had other arrangements on hand. But now, thanks to your friend there, that's finished. I can give you my answer by word of mouth. You need something stronger than a parson's hand and his wife's sermons to keep you out of mischief."

"I won't come," said Melian, and ran across to clasp her uncle's arm. "Uncle Simon, don't let him take me away. I won't be troublesome. Let me stay at Thrope."

"Really, my dear child," her uncle rejoined, with a touch of impatience, "this affair is all so mysterious. I cannot see my way clear. On the whole, we cannot do

better than ask your aunt's advice. Don't be frightened; your father was always impetuous. But this letter—what letter? I fear there has been some deception here. Yes, on the whole, I think we may trust your aunt's judgment."

"Let us go," said Forster, "the air will cool our tempers. Melian, will you drive with me?"

She would not speak to him, and her obstinacy, in which he recognised something of his own quality, pleased him. He took her shoulders between his hands.

"Do you know why I put that letter aside? It was the letter of a young lady, all she should be, a pattern of virtue with the copy-book got by heart; milk and water. I would not trouble to answer it. But now—I do not regret this evening. We have both made fools of ourselves, but we have seen each other as we are. A good beginning; we may build something worth while on that, Melian?"

His voice asked something that was not in the words, and in her blood, so deep that she hardly felt it stir, something answered. Down sank the flame.

"Great-coats while you please, and gloves when you weary," said Mrs. Dest, in her voice tempered keenly as a sword-blade to hurt, "it is the fortune of—trade."

With her laugh, understanding died. Melian dropped her eyes, the merest sulky chidden girl, and Forster turned away from her, saying roughly:

"No need to keep the cattle waiting on our tantrums. I'll drive alone. Get a coat, Simon; Julia will turn you out of doors for a mountebank if you show up as you are. And a cloak for the girl."

He went out, striding heavily through the hall, Mr. Montfort and Melian timidly following. They said no

good-bye to Mrs. Dest, who stood by the fire looking after them with a little sideways smile. By and by, taking the tongs, she picked up a glove that lay on the floor and thrust it into the heart of the coals, where she held it until it shrivelled.

CHAPTER SIX

THROPE

I

BREAKFAST, a meal lacking amenity, drew to its close unlamented by the four persons gathered about the table at Thrope Rectory. Mrs. Montfort's habitual cheerfulness was a little overcast thinking of negotiations to come, conducted in person and by means of conversation; exposed, therefore, to accidents and interruptions from which correspondence was free. Conversation in the ordinary way held no fears for Mrs. Montfort; she could conduct her sentences safely through twenty clauses to their conclusion, if she were sure of her opponent's manners. But her brother upset her, being unscrupulous, prompt, and impatient of periods, so that she lost confidence, doubted the issue, and sat gloomily before her coffee-urn, which for once reflected no smile of welcome to the day.

Her brother, having swallowed his breakfast with a haste which told of minutes grudged from the warehouse in youth, stood by the window down which rain-drops hastened, and tapped on the panes with his nails. He, too, was in no easy mood, and had slept ill, jealousy riding him. He promised himself one pleasure at least when the discussion should begin—that of tearing to tatters his sister's fine sentences; for the rest he was undecided.

Melian had eaten nothing, spoken not at all. She, like her father, had not slept; she, too, had found names

that stung for her own folly. In the cold hours she had tumbled out of bed on to her knees, praying without faith for courage to face the morning, and reassuring herself with considerations that brought little comfort. She could not, she told herself, be forced to go with that man, who had kept a woman in his house for his pleasure; the fact clothed itself in a Biblical phrase or two that hitherto had been almost without meaning. Now, in the night, the meaning began to come, in pictures, gestures, not fully conceived, carried to no climax, shuddered away from as they became loathsome. There were no tears for Melian that night, because no self-pity. Disquiet, hatred, and an overwhelming animal fear between them divided her soul.

Mr. Montfort, once more clothed in black, installed once more amid kindly habitual surroundings, was entirely himself. He ate heartily, with his clergyman's air of enjoying heaven's bounty, and his scholar's air of caring at heart for none of these things. He had slept well, moreover, having refused, with a surprising steadfastness disguised as fatigue, to answer any of his wife's questions; and he had prepared a number of excellent excuses and small tasks which might enable him to escape from the inevitable conclave. These he intended to employ frugally, so that no hour should find him unoccupied or available. Rejoicing in security, he talked alone.

"Melian, Melian, town fashions again! Not eating! Heavy eyes! Do not think to please your father by being modish, he sees enough of such behaviour in town. And your plate—you eat nothing! This is a sad falling-off."

"Are you at liberty this morning, Simon?" asked his wife: and her voice was portentous.

Mr. Montfort scurried away to take refuge behind his prepared defences.

"Well, my dear, as you know, much of yesterday was wasted—mis-spent, if you will, since the digging was not carried far enough. However, from the arrangement of the stones I am pretty sure that I was right——"

"I refer to this morning," rejoined his wife coldly. "To-day, Saturday. At what hour are you free?"

Mr. Montfort had not anticipated the question quite in this form.

"My dear," said he, "I do not know that I can answer. My time is not my own. There are parish claims which have no fixed hour, yet cannot be neglected——"

"Important though they are," said Mrs. Montfort, "they must not take precedence of graver considerations such as may affect our niece's future, and which it is our present duty to weigh."

"Weigh, neigh," said her brother, swinging round from the window, "there is no need to make a Parliament matter of this, Julia; no need for your interference, nor Simon's shuffling. The girl and I can settle it between us in half an hour."

"Half an hour!" Mrs. Montfort repeated, with lifted hands.

"I have settled affairs worth thousands of pounds in less," he replied coolly, "and I see no reason why I should spend more of my time, which is my money, upon Miss here."

"But consider," Mrs. Montfort implored, "you cannot justly compare an affair of money, mere lucre, with such a matter as this; here no one hand is the choice between rural simplicity, pious unostentation, and the Babylonian splendours and levity of town."

"I do not know what you would be at," said her brother bluntly, "you talk as if I were about to set up my daughter in Carlton House. She has plenty of sense, when she chooses to display it, and I suppose knows how to order a dinner. I do not ask more."

"Well," said Mr. Montfort, rising, perceiving that the discussion had broken upon him, "you will excuse me, I know. You must not think, Horatio, that we country fellows sit all day with idle hands——"

"They do less harm than idle heads," his brother-in-law responded.

"Yes," Mr. Montfort nodded, "quite so. I think, then, on the whole——"

Despite his helpless air, he found the door, absently opened it, and in a cloud of contemplation, escaped. Mrs. Montfort had expected and seen through this manœuvre, which it was not worth while to check. She preferred, indeed, the methods of single combat to which her husband's departure committed her, and determined not to let her courage cool by waiting.

"Shall we withdraw to the parlour?" she asked. "I have no distractions to offer you, Horatio; no billiards, no cards."

"I do not play cards at ten of the morning," said her brother sourly, "nor do I know of any man in his senses who does. The parlour, if you like."

Mrs. Montfort rose and feeling safe at her full height, addressed Melian.

"Your father and I have much to deliberate. You had better—I think—since your father's estimate of time required to attain a conclusion is humorously minimised—preside at the distribution of linen in my stead. I will give you the keys."

Her brother halted her stately exit with the words: "That won't do. The girl must be there to have her say."

"Impossible!" said Mrs. Montfort, puffing out the word with force.

"She must hear both sides," resumed Forster, "and then please herself."

"It is out of the question! Her judgment is totally unformed."

"It is her own life; and as far as I have observed, the only way to live is to make your own mistakes and learn as you go."

"But she entirely lacks experience."

"Let her earn some, then. Other people's experience is useless. However, if you do not approve, Julia, we may as well leave you out of it. That will save time."

He crossed glances, swords, with Melian.

"What place is there in this house where they won't disturb us?"

"The little sewing-room," Melian answered at once, rising.

"Show me."

They went quickly out together, leaving Mrs. Montfort thunderstruck.

II

This sanctuary, half attic, half storeroom, was devoted to sewing as distinct from needlework; here sheets were turned sides to middle, fugitive tapes reclaimed, aprons and other domestic linen cut out on the table, on whose surface a tracery of arabesques had been left by the pattern wheel. Horatio Forster, having placed a chair for his daughter, seated himself at this table,

and clasping his hands before him began negotiations.

"Let us see now," said he in a business-like tone, "what the position is. I have the advantage of you in that I know both sides——"

He broke off, looking towards the door.

"You are sure we are safe from interruption?"

"I can't answer for Aunt Julia."

"No one has done that since her baptism. We must take our chance."

The half-smiles were not permitted to linger. He proceeded gravely:

"A few questions first to clear the ground. What is your age?"

"Seventeen and two months."

"Just about ripe, then; as far as anything can come to maturity among these semi-dead. And what is mine, do you suppose? My age?"

She scrutinised him; grey hairs, young eyes, thin figure, knotted hands; added them, and presented the sum.

"Fifty?"

"Forty-six. Not such a patriarch, you see. That makes it easier to talk. Now! Since when have you changed your mind about coming to me? That letter was definite."

He waited, and then repeated the question as a statement.

"You changed your mind last night at Mawdry. Isn't it so?"

Her silence agreed. The little shock of his words caused a blush to start. He went on:

"I don't owe you an explanation. You had no business to be there, and I was not to know who you were. But

I will tell you this much. That woman, not long ago, was an inmate of my house; you had gathered that? Very well. Every calling, even hers, has its own standard of behaviour; she was faithless and worthless even by those standards, not high ones. I had a right to treat her as dirt. She is dirt; roadside stuff."

Melian could feel the blush mounting. She hated, and willed it away, but her father observed it.

"Shocked? I was forgetting this damned parsonage atmosphere."

Melian looked at him steadily, disregarding the blush as well as she could.

"Yet you had her in your house."

"I did. No credit to me, but no blame, either. You saw what she is, and I am no saint on a pedestal. But we need not return to that. She has gone, taken herself off, and—apart from a little natural masculine raging—I don't think I regret it. It was time for me to make a change in my life. She has gone; that makes your coming possible, if you still wish it."

She answered, looking away:

"I don't wish it any longer."

There was a silence before he asked:

"What's your reason?"

"I don't think it would be"—oh, irony! The inevitable word—"suitable."

He sat back, with an abrupt, intolerant laugh.

"In other words, Miss Prim, you've taken fright."

Indignantly she rejected this.

"I've not. I'm not afraid of you."

"Call it playing for safety. Well, let us try to foresee the result of that. Let us suppose you stay here. What will be your future?" He stared at the ceiling as though

he read it there. "Attendance at church and on your aunt. New dresses and no one to look at them. A ball once every two years, at which you may meet and marry some yokel. You'd choose this? It doesn't alarm you?"

Against her conviction she answered:

"It need not be—it may not be like that."

"How else?" he asked; then, recognising her hesitation: "You know it well enough. Dull as ditch-water, and safe, safe, safe! You're no daughter of mine if you find that prospect pleasing."

She tried another tack, equally unconvincing.

"I prefer to stay here."

"Before you know the alternative? That is no way to do business."

He got up and began to walk in the cramped space, which afforded him no more than four full strides between window and door. For a minute he paced in silence while she sat listlessly, her fingers following the pricked arabesques on the table. At last he spoke, halting by her chair.

"Understand, I am not going to plead with you. That, certainly, would not be suitable."

He stressed the word a little, mocking her; then continued, with greater seriousness:

"But here we are, the two of us, with the same blood in our veins, for what that is worth, and with something the same problem before us; each restless, each faced with a new beginning. You are not going to tell me you are contented here? The truth, now!"

She tried to answer honestly.

"No. But it may be my own fault."

He would have none of that.

"Leave responsibility aside. You have done with childhood. I've done with manhood; anyhow, with youth. It is a difficult time——"

He paused, and slowly added:

"It seems to me not unnatural that we should join forces just for this period; make—what am I to call it?—an agreement for mutual aid."

She was moved. She had expected anything else, a command, an insistence on the relationship between them, an appeal based on this. She did not know how to answer a suggestion which admitted equality, and asked for partnership.

"So far, I have not had much room in my life for affection," went on Horatio Forster, "nor much need. I believe it to be a sentiment which a man, after the age of twenty or so, can very well do without. And yet what I ask has a touch of this very weakness. A man of forty-six has to be continually reassuring himself. His time for doing is nearly over, he must consider what he has done. And it is consolation if he may look at one single thing he has achieved, and say to himself, 'That, at least, was worth while: that will live.'"

He stood square in front of her: she looked up. Not moving, his eyes on hers, he brought his statement to its conclusion.

"There you have my side of the thing. Yours, I am not to dictate to you. You and I are strangers still; and which is the real Melian, this rectory mouse or the girl who struck me last night, I cannot tell. But your answer will decide it."

Her answer was ready. Yet she hesitated, hating the ebb and flow of inclination and changing circumstance that would not let her know her own mind for long

together. She had been unhappy, had implored rescue. Rescue had come, but in a form which caused her to reject it. Must the rejection stand? One inconsistency the more, what matter? And the terms of surrender were honourable. She held out her hand to her father.

"What, a bargain?" he asked, scanning her face.

She nodded. He took the hand then, clasped it firmly and let it go.

"You are no fool," said he, with a kind of affectionate roughness, "nor so much of the young lady as I had feared. Well; and now, which of us is to break the news to your Aunt Julia?"

III

For a week that question was left in the air; which, being air of Thrope, unfamiliar with mystery, became daily more thunder-charged. Mysteries, at Thrope, would not do, did not thrive. Mrs. Montfort was accustomed to know all, and without asking; the reticence which her brother observed, and imposed upon Melian, was to her wormwood and gall. She made no comment as, morning by morning, her brother's groom brought his currie to the door, and her brother set out, east or west, with a word tossed over his shoulder—"I'll dine where the hour finds me." She was not, in general, a silent woman, but during these days of curiosity, righteous but held in leash, she permitted words to fail her. The house trembled under disapproval unspoken. Meals, it is true, were cooked and eaten, furniture was waxed, and one by one sheep, fleeced with French knots, appeared upon the wool-work screen. There were conversations; but these were mockeries, profitless as the crackling of thorns, and as little warming to the atmos-

phere. This storm, gathering in the mind of the autocrat of Thrope, could not long be contained. It must pass on or break; and as from a threatening cloud the watcher may see a ragged fringe droop suddenly towards earth, so Melian, sitting at breakfast ten days after her father's arrival, knew by her aunt's first sentence that the storm was upon them.

"Will you require packages of food to be provided to-day, Horatio?" she inquired, "or do you give your beasts a well-deserved pause from labour? I may remind you that to-day is the Sabbath."

"It is lucky," rejoined her brother, deliberately spooning up an egg, "that my inclination jumps with convention for once. I do not drive to-day. There is no longer any necessity."

He left this last phrase unexplained, and with a smile awaited questions. He was not disappointed.

"Do you justify by the tyrants' plea your obsession for speed and variety of scene? I regret that you should use words so lightly."

"I use words as they come," said her brother, "what I say is clear enough. There is no need for me to drive to-day. I have found my house."

"A house, Papa?" timidly said Melian, amid the formidable silence.

"Seven miles off," he answered. "I have bought it; it has good stables. If you do not like the rest, we can rebuild. If you do, we may be installed in a week."

As ever, when her sentiments or her understanding were outraged, Mrs. Montfort rose to her full height. Her question had temper and bewilderment behind it.

"Do I understand, Horatio, that you have deliber-

ately purchased a neighbouring property behind my back?"

"What has your back to do with it? I have bought a house, and on good terms, too. My offer came in the nick of time, on the heels of a death. He would have paid me to take it, I believe, had I been a few days earlier; but a fortnight makes all the difference in these matters, between grief and downright folly."

Mrs. Montfort's face was suffused; the faithful urn could no longer reflect it, but her husband and niece, by their immediate attention to the contents of plates and cups, acknowledged its significant flush. It was, in its rich colouring, the imperious angle of the nose, a command made visible, and a warning; command that there should be no further trifling, warning that retribution was at hand. Her brother, however, considered the face only as a spectacle, and as such, admitted it to be impressive.

"The stage was your mission, Julia," said he; "these attitudes are wasted upon private life. That pose of yours, with the addition of three yards of velvet and a cardboard crown, would do very well for any queen of them that ever was poisoned."

Defiance Mrs. Montfort could meet, rebellion she could quash, silence she could interpret according to her own wishes. Her brother's method disarmed her utterly, leaving her without resource other than a strategic retreat. She did not answer him. She bent an eye, which was avoided, upon the cravens deep in their plates, and after a pause momentous as the still anticipation of thunder, left the room. Behind her crackled her brother's laugh.

"You need not be affronted," he called after her, "I

had no notion of clapping you into a ballet-skirt." Then to Mr. Montfort, pale, and with no appetite left for apple jelly: "Have you never, Simon, mounted your pulpit on a Sunday, and found Julia there before you?"

"Julia," said Mr. Montfort helplessly, "is an excellent churchwoman."

"But a better Sophonisba," said her brother, and laughed again.

"I think," said Mr. Montfort gently, rising, "I think that, on the whole, I will go to my study. I have one or two matters—one or two points—Melian, will you inform your aunt that I do not wish to be disturbed?"

He drifted away, with an expression that forbade further discussion of actualities, and Melian dared to approach the subject of the house.

"Papa," she asked, "what have you done?"

"Come, now," said he, "I have done no murder; though to hear Julia you might think so. I have bought a house. It is my right, if I can pay for it. I have bought a house, and you shall live there if you can like it well enough."

He saw by her expression that she did not understand, and pushing aside his plate with impatient good humour began to explain:

"See," said he, drawing with a spoon some shadowy pattern upon the cloth, "here it is. I'll set the plan before you as quickly as I may. I am, to begin with, pretty well to do. Your aunt has told you that?"

He looked up sharply. Melian hedged.

"She does not speak of you often."

"Well, well, she does not care for trade. I put coats on a lot of poor devils' backs, and a man like this Pomfret strips them with his rack-renting; yet he is the

gentleman. Let it go. I have money. I may snap my fingers at contracts if I choose. (There is no quixotry in this. We are at the end of this war, and all other wars, for many a long day. There will be no more soldiers needing clothing; and though civilians wear coats, too, there are fewer fools among them. They will have their money's worth, which governments disdain.) I have had it in mind this long time to turn country gentleman."

He ceased to make patterns, threw down the spoon, and with his hands clasped on the table before him, talked on, as though to make clear to himself his course of thought.

"London," said Horatio Forster, "is all very well when a man is young, and has his business to attend to, and his pleasure to look forward to. But there comes an age—I have reached it—when both these things draw away; and when that comes, the man who pursues them is one of the more ludicrous sights of creation. I have no mind to be laughed at over wool or women."

Melian was quiet, doubtful still of his intention, afraid to question or to interrupt.

"You are disappointed, I dare say," said he, looking at her once more, "you had hoped for London."

"No," said Melian, and went on with difficulty: "But something different. Different from all this—from Thrope. A house near by will still be the same."

"You think so, do you?" said he. "Well, there cannot be much variety in life for a woman, no matter what her station or where her home."

"It's not fair," Melian cried out passionately.

"No," he agreed, with indifference. "Women had best keep out of the game, I think. But we have gone away from our matter. This house—I have bought it as

it stands, pots and pans, linen, and all. There has been a death—nothing infectious or out of the way. Child-birth. But you have enough backbone, I hope, for this not to set you against the place. There have been deaths, and worse than that, in every house.”

“I don’t mind,” she answered, still worrying at his unchallengeable statement.

“Good. Then we have only to fit ourselves with servants and move in. That shall be your business. You have full authority from me to settle things how you please. As for your aunt, let her go hang.”

Melian, desiring to show a practical grasp of the situation, found this permission overwhelming. She sought for some detail, concerning which she might show herself intelligent and willing, but none presented itself. There were only facts, to be faced blindly as a horse is ridden at a tall bank. Her father evidently regarded the thing as settled; he had risen, and was turning over the contents of a pocket-book with an air of having said his say. Melian, seeking her detail, found it as he reached the door.

“How many servants, Papa?”

“As many as you need,” said he, with a brief glance of surprise. “Let us be comfortable, and let the cook have some ideas beyond boiling and roasting.”

“And the house,” she went on. “What am I to expect? Is it larger than this?”

“Than this?”

He looked about the Montforts’ breakfast parlour, a room whose purpose seemed to be static rather than social; existing because of the furniture, to contain, and provide a frame for tables, a sideboard, and chairs.

“Yes,” said Horatio Forster, “I should say it was

larger, or perhaps less encumbered. I did not take much heed. It is well built, modern, and the stables are good. But you had better see the place for yourself."

She wished to be independent and spirited, and could find no way. She continued her questioning:

"How shall I get there? When must I be ready?"

He answered with some impatience: "Are there no horses to be hired in Pliny Abbots? Your uncle has a nag. Go over—take your aunt if you must. She will have her say somehow, depend upon it. Spend a night there; you will find all in order, and a servant or two left. Engage others in Pliny, have the chimneys swept, do whatever is to be done. I shall return in three weeks or so from London. Let it be ready by then if you can. You will need money. Here——"

He flicked a bill to her, which her fingers, taken by surprise, let fall.

"—One hundred pounds. That will serve till I come."

She picked it up, smoothed and folded it, still dumb, distressed by responsibility too suddenly and too completely bestowed. From the door he turned upon her a glance that questioned and mocked.

"Will it be the same, do you think, Thrope house-keeping and mine? No difference?"

Melian, the bill between her fingers, and the memory of ten years' frugalities in her mind, reluctantly and abruptly laughed. From behind the closing door she heard her laughter echoed; and a moment later saw her father striking across the lawn, a direction which must take him every moment further from the church, whose bell had begun to call five minutes before. Towards the stable where his horses were lodged he made his way, leaving Melian in possession of more money than she

had ever held in her life; with full authority to set in order a house she had never seen: and permission to let her terrifying aunt go hang. She was seventeen, a young woman grown, and often by night she had implored opportunity of heaven. Nevertheless, she trembled.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DANCING CORNER

I

THE Toll House stood at a corner where three roads met. A high road circled its wall to the north and sent tributaries off on either hand, one to the plain, another towards the distant river; the spot where they branched was called Dancing Corner. The dancers it commemorated had kept up their jig in all weathers till they blackened and fell in shreds from the supporting chains. It was long, however, since there had been a hanging at the cross-roads; malefactors, it was found, could be turned off at less expense in the county town; and, the neighbourhood having remained loyal and law-abiding, there was no need to transport bodies to this distant spot for purposes of example and warning.

Therefore, the gibbet had been allowed to decay: and at last, some gipsy marauders in need of fuel having hacked away the supports, it came tottering down in a high wind and was carted off secretly, but very completely; wood, at this treeless edge of the plain, being worth any reasonable risk to obtain. It was five years at least since the gibbet had stood outside the Toll House gate.

As to the house itself, its name had survived its origin. No tolls had been paid at that point on the road since the monks held Pliny; and the house had changed hands—changed stones, mortar, aspect—ten times since then. Only the site could not change, for that was determined

by the presence of a spring, the only water for a mile or more. The house kept no memory, and had forgotten equally tonsures, and rickety measures danced involuntarily upon the wind. The existing building was no more than three years old, a red brick house painted with white, having wide windows in the new manner and adequate stabling. The refinements were not neglected. There was a shrubbery, and the adroit sinking of a fence, together with the piling-up of a small terrace beneath the southern windows, permitted a view. But these were considerations for Melian; Horatio Forster's requirements were fulfilled by the stables, and the comfortable certainty of having secured a bargain. He was a country gentleman at last, she an independent woman, governing with her own brain her own affairs; and if the one sighed, amid the compact, slow-moving country life, for a window that should show men walking rather than steadfast trees, the other, in the intervals of house-keeping, found leisure to wonder that life and fleeting youth should take so little note of her new dignity.

II

She had found interests enough, nevertheless, in her three months' reign, in the rearrangement of the rooms, the gradual working-out of a routine, and the adaptation of this to her father's convenience. She had pre-occupations, but no anxieties until the matter of Alice forced itself upon her attention.

Alice, the housemaid, was a peace-offering from Mrs. Montfort. Not lightly had that lady accepted the emancipation of her niece. There had been exhortations, warnings, a final majestic washing of hands: and, in the end, Alice. Alice was a good enough servant, admitted

Mrs. Montfort, who had her eye on a better one; and accordingly Alice—who was, it seemed, allowed no voice in her own destiny—was conveyed to the Toll House in a commandeered farm-cart on the same afternoon and by the same road that her mistress, with the aid of Frank and Pompey, quitted Thrope for her new home. On arrival, however, the ways of mistress and maid diverged; for while Melian, having disposed her belongings and adjusted her dress, came downstairs to sit in proud weariness in her own drawing-room, Alice entered the kitchen quarters, and after an hour of normal behaviour fainted without warning upon the scullery floor. Melian, her solitude rudely broken by the entrance of a frightened servant, went in alarm to the scene of the occurrence, where she found the girl revived, but sobbing hysterically and calling Frank's name, he standing sullenly by. Seeing Melian, Alice rose and choked down her tears, with a muttered excuse and some half-coherent story of how the long drive had upset her; all the time her eyes looked over Melian's shoulder towards Frank, with pitiful insistence.

Melian, understanding partly, told Alice, three years older than herself, not to cry, but to be a good girl; and Alice, her head hanging, tears welling still, seemed silently to agree and to promise. Melian spoke to Frank, telling him not to delay his return too long, that Mrs. Montfort would be anxious; she did not dare, in face of his sulky composure, make any reference to Alice. He was respectful as ever, took her messages for her aunt, and went out towards the stables without a glance at the girl; and Melian, from the drawing-room ten minutes later, heard Pompey's hoofs plodding homeward down the drive.

The incident appeared to have no sequel. Alice went about her work competently, and seemed to become more contented during the weeks that followed, though she did not succeed altogether in that first duty of a servant as laid down by Mrs. Montfort, the maintenance of her health. She did not complain, however, and after a few weeks Melian became accustomed to her pallor and her silence, and ceased to be concerned for her.

But a day came when Melian, walking in the grounds, saw, turning the corner of the drive that led towards the kitchen quarters, the figure of a country-woman, unfamiliar yet not strange. The face, seen for a moment only, was set with some strong intent; tired, but the more malevolent for that. She was no villager. Her boots were white with the dust of a long road. In the sunny spaces of the garden hers was a discomfiting presence, and Melian was glad when she turned the corner and her half-remembered face could be forgotten in the planning of the new flower-beds and the enjoyment of those that were already filled and blooming.

Melian was deep in talk with the gardener, approving his scheme for setting three apricots in line along the southern wall of the stable buildings, when she saw his eyes leave her face and stare, surprised, over her left shoulder. No footfall could be heard upon the turf where they stood, and thus the intruder had approached to within a few strides' distance when Melian turned. Instinctively she made the gesture, spoke the sentence that sent the gardener about his business, and with the first word that came to her ears remembered the woman fully.

Alice's mother, she thought; and aloud said: "Mrs. Goard!"

There was no time for more. The woman sneered, and overwhelmed her with the hideous voice that had called vile things from an upper window of Danbury Farm.

"Right, missy," harshly said the woman, "right, and wrong. Goard's wife, lawful and legal; but for that slut in there, she needn't look to me. Mother! That's a name carries a curse, anyhow, and twice over unless it's spoken lawful. She's found that a'ready—her, with her brat that'll cut its teeth on no ring."

"Why do you come to me?" Melian asked, clutching at her dignity, wishing for her father's presence. "What do you want?"

"I come to say I'm done with her. Let you fend for her. She came to harm in gentry's house—your parson uncle, he'll shake in his breeches, the old minikin, once madam comes to hear! Who knows but he had a hand in it? Like man, like master."

Melian did not speak, and the woman, peering into her white face, went on brutally:

"Frank Halfpenny won't marry her, she says. Not he, while he can get what he wants without. A nice family I've got! Four buried, praise God; and this slut, and there's her half-brother Isaac in Pliny now waiting for the 'Sizes. They'll hang him, and there's another underground."

She drew in her breath and sent it out again in a short yelping laugh.

"The fool! Couldn't throw a stone straight; broke Sir Hilary's hat and gets hanged for it. Well, I'll see to it he has company. That's all I'll say."

She nodded mysteriously.

"That's all. As for Alice, let her go on the roads. She's lived dirty, she can lie dirty. And for Frank Halfpenny, he won't make a wife of her, won't he? Then he'll make a widow."

She went away, without farewell, across the grass and down the drive. Melian looked after her, both hands clasped on her breast as though to protect her heart, which beat with sickening slowness, and shivered, standing in the sun. The gardener, who had been watching, came up, spoke, and she answered, hearing her own voice light and thin, unreal as the whole scene through which she had passed. The woman belonged to a nightmare world, not the world of every day, nor even of accepted tragedy, for in that was dignity; blood, and fine attitudes, and broken hearts symbolized by loosened hair. Even the ugly encounter between her father and Mrs. Dest had possessed something of this dignity; there was restraint save for one passionate moment, and the protagonists were finely dressed, clean-handed. Mrs. Goard, with her split nails, the smell of her clothes, her voice rasping out threats—Mrs. Goard was horror. Yet she had borne kind, stupid Alice, whom Melian allowed to do her little intimate services; pink-frocked, cleanly Alice, who moved quietly, spoke so respectfully, and who waited now in the house, afraid, bearing in her body an unwanted child.

Melian was all at sea. She lingered in the garden while she could, putting off, putting off the moment when she must face the living problem that awaited her; but at last a sharp shower of rain descending without warning sent her back to the house.

It smelled sweetly of roses, and was cool. The draw-

ing-room held within its friendly walls assurance of tranquillity, the certainty that life should be calm and ordered, undisturbed by the gross wants and hatreds of the herd. But Melian could not accept this comfort; the thought of her servant's distress hung about her in that lovely room like some taint upon the air, and she moved restlessly, seeking some way of escape.

The fortnightly letter to her aunt was due. She sat down at her secretary, and taking a sheet of note-paper, looked at it long. She knew, since the woman in her accusation had named Frank, that her aunt should be told of the matter, but the words would not come. She tried, and tore up the sheet, and tried again, knowing it must be done. The woman had not only accused, she had threatened, and would perform; Melian had a lively memory of her voice hounding on men to violence. This memory gave courage, and the letter took shape, asking Mrs. Montfort to dine at the Toll House three days hence, and requiring her advice "upon an urgent matter, too delicate to be committed to paper." Thus did Melian appeal for help to her aunt; who, though she might trample on fantasy and refuse her countenance to those who imagined a vain thing, was in domestic crises a strong tower.

Melian, sealing her note, rang the bell for a servant to take it to the stables, whence a groom might convey it to Thrope. This summons a manservant should have answered, but to her astonishment when the door was tapped and opened it was Alice herself who came into the room. At sight of her, Melian felt a tiny shock, and for all she bit her lip, a blush spread over her cheeks and mounted until her very forehead burned. The girl before her did not lift her eyes nor see this distress; she did not

look up when Melian said shortly, angry at her own embarrassment:

"I rang for Walter. There is a letter to be taken to Thrope."

Alice did not answer or move.

"I want it to reach Mrs. Montfort this afternoon," Melian went on. "John will be exercising Grenadier, and he may ride in that direction, unless my father has given other orders."

For the first time Alice looked up, and said, as though Melian had not spoken:

"I'm to go away."

Melian answered, thinking she had misunderstood:

"No, John; John is to deliver it. You will give the letter to him."

The girl repeated dully:

"I'm to go. I can't stay here."

Procrastination had not served. The situation which the letter tried to put by was upon them both, without warning. Melian said, unthinking, for something to say while she gathered her wits:

"Aren't you happy here?"

The question was a mockery. She knew it, and hurried on:

"What will you do?"

Then, desperately, in face of what Alice's answer might be:

"I spoke with your mother. You cannot go back to her. You must stay here until—I shall tell Mrs. Hemp that you are not to do heavy work——"

The girl interrupted, breaking into stammering protest, pouring out her trouble in spate, inarticulate with tears.

"She says she'll swear 'twas him did it—Frank. Because of what he done with me, she'll swear against him. Miss, for God's sake—Frank's good, he'll make it right with me." With sudden savageness: "He'll show those bitches their place. He'd 'a' married me, only he was feared of being turned off. If he lost his place—there's hundreds on the roads now, he says, that can never hope to get work. I'll never blame him for that—no, nor be a drag to him. Miss, don't you let her tell. If you'll speak for him, there's none'll believe her, if you swear he was with the carriage. Isaac"—thumb and finger flicked together—"let him swing, I say! A dirty, sly poacher, that could no more stand up to Frank——"

"I can't swear," Melian interrupted; then answered the agonised breath and bitten lip with what cold comfort she could. "But if Frank did not do it, if he was not there, he cannot be convicted. The judges do not condemn a man if he is innocent."

"You swear for him," the girl blubbered, "don't let them listen to her. Don't let them hang Frank."

"But," Melian answered, very distinctly, fighting the losing battle of reason against hysteria, "if he did not do it, nobody can hurt him. If your mother swears—why, she was not there, not on the hill. If people swear falsely they are punished, they are perjurers. All kinds of things can be done to them. So you see, what she says cannot matter, since he is innocent. Alice, don't you see?"

Something in the girl's aspect checked her. She drew back her hand, held out in a reassuring explanatory gesture.

"Do you mean," Melian asked slowly, "that he is not innocent?"

A sob, a jerk of the hanging head assented.

"He did it?" Melian breathed, incredulous. "Struck Sir Hilary? But, Alice, why? Why? It was madness——"

The girl's voice struggled past the gag of tears.

"He and Isaac were friends. Frank was born nigh us, nigh Danbury. He went up the hill with them—just to see, like, never thinking on trouble. Then, what with seeing the old place cut about; and Sir Hilary spoke the way, Frank said, no men should bear, while they have guts in their bodies. And Sir Hilary took his whip, then, to Isaac——"

As suddenly as it had started the torrent ceased, and Alice, wringing her apron between her hands, stood weeping. But she had told enough. Melian knew that this must be the truth; she remembered the carriage standing unattended by the roadside, the search for Frank in the rain. She sat at her secretary, tapping with her letter upon the desk, considering blankly her own powerlessness. The girl trusted her: the unlettered woman came for help in her trouble to one whose ability to use the globe, write copperplate, and array woolwork sheep in a fleece of French knots made her competent to advise.

The silence between the two women, which the regular taps of the letter, the occasional sob, seemed only to deepen, was broken at last by steps and a hand upon the door. Instantly the girl snatched up Melian's letter, and with her apron pressed clumsily against her mouth, stood aside in the doorway for Horatio Forster to enter.

Forster cocked an eye after the girl and towards Melian.

"Trouble, hey?" said he. "I know that look they

put on, as if this were the first time it had happened since the Flood, and they could not, for the life of them, tell how. Which of our men is it?"

Thankfully, in her perplexity of mind forgetting awkwardness, Melian told the story. He listened, laughed.

"Money will settle it. Money settles most questions. How much will the fellow take to marry her?"

But Melian would not suppose the tangle so easily straightened out.

"Papa, if this woman swears that it was Frank struck Sir Hilary——"

"Why, then you and your uncle can swear he didn't, and let the judge choose between you."

"But I can't swear——" she wailed.

"Let it alone, girl. See what comes. Your aunt is to dine, is she, on Friday. Leave it to me, I'll quiz her. Faith, I respect the fellow, daring to put a girl in that way under Julia's roof."

He glanced sharply at his daughter.

"Don't frown. I hold my tongue pretty well for a man that has been used to free speech. How often do I shock you now—twice a week?"

She shook her head, with a little awkward laugh. He went on:

"Come what may, we'll go into Pliny for the Assizes. There'll be junketings, won't there? A ball, or some such matter, for those that don't care for hangings."

He walked about, gently clapping his hands together; then, turning to her, abruptly:

"How the devil do you spend your day?"

She answered, surprised:

"Reading—ordering. The time goes by."

"Does it?" said he. "At a walk, then, if it does."

These country days! Thirty-six hours long, all of them. I must find something to do."

He halted by the grate and kicked over a coal or two.

"Wanted, an occupation for gentleman, as yet in his right mind."

"There must be a great deal of parish business," Melian suggested, without much hope.

"I've not come to that yet—arguing which side of a hedge a hen may run without penalty."

"The bench of magistrates——"

"They will not elect me," said he, very shortly. "That is a Pomfret preserve. The nominations are made from Mawdry, and the Lord-Lieutenant has nothing to say to it. My God!" exclaimed Horatio Forster, "it is mere tyranny. The King's writ does not run here. This man sprawls all over the county, has all of them, big wigs and little, by the nose. In London he is nothing. I have a mighty good mind——"

"You will not go to London?"

"Not yet. Not yet, if I can see my way through the lawyers. But they're hide-bound, calf-bound, a set of cowards. I'm no country gentleman, no Sir Hilary"—she was astonished at the anger in his voice at that name—"but I'm a match, I think, for any such. He lacks one thing. Money, Melian. You've been taught to look down on it; but it's worth having, worth sweating to earn. You can take one man out of gaol with it and put another man in. This Frank, now, eh? Threw the stone, did he? Well—we'll see."

And without explanations, moving impulsively as was his custom, he went away to his own room, leaving Melian to sit alone in some distress of mind. She knew

what, for lack of other occupations, her father found to do, and looked forward, dismayed, to the flushed face and heavy breath that would greet her when she went at ten o'clock to bid him good-night.

Before this ordeal, however, came comfort. Mrs. Montfort would gladly come to the Toll House on Friday to dine.

III

Mrs. Montfort was faithful to her word. At two o'clock on Friday the sound of wheels drew Melian to her window, whence she could freely observe her aunt's majestic arrival. She did not run to the door—such procedure, she knew, would form a theme for scolding—but waited, every curl in place, until her aunt should have adjusted her dress. There was no long delay, five minutes, no more, of footsteps, and maids scurrying, and loud stately orders; then Walter could throw open the door and announce the visitor in a voice which might have done very well for proclaiming a queen.

"Child," said Mrs. Montfort, after the embrace, holding her niece away from her, "you are not in health. This is pallor."

"I am never red-faced, Aunt Julia."

"Dairymaid, no; but there was a sub-tinge of carmine. What is this urgent matter? A love-affair?"

Melian did not answer directly, but busied herself with the selection of a chair appropriate to her aunt's contours. Mrs. Montfort disdained the offered bergère with: "Bodily comfort I hope I can despise." Mental ease, however, she craved, and could not so easily put by. She repeated, with a kind of ponderous impatience: "What is this affair? And where is your father?"

Horatio Forster, entering, answered the question himself.

"Here I am," said he. "You did not bring Simon? Just as well. I have nothing to entertain him. He has no palate to speak of."

"He has an example to set," Mrs. Montfort retorted briskly.

"Has he? He should set his house in order first."

At this insinuation, slowly his sister turned.

"Explain yourself, Horatio."

"After dinner," said he, perceiving that she was in throes of curiosity, and being resolved to deny her satisfaction as long as he could. "What is for dinner, Melian? I hope you have got something that your aunt cannot do with. She is too well fed at home. It is our duty as Christians to mortify her if we can."

Mrs. Montfort sank at last into the chair Melian offered, and with a shake of the wrist brought her skirts swirling into place about her feet.

"Melian," said she, setting frivolity aside, "wrote for my advice."

"It is her way," answered Horatio Forster, with a half-smile at his daughter. "She rushes into black and white without much thought. I dare say it was no more than a recipe she needed for preserving green rhubarb."

"Rhubarb in August!" Mrs. Montfort exclaimed, lifting her hands.

"Or whatever fruit may be in season," he continued, unperturbed. "I am no country gentleman, remember. I know what time of the year wool is clipped; that is as much of the country as suits my trade."

"Trade!" repeated his sister, exasperated. "Why will you insist upon this connection? You were not born

to it. Your link with it is now severed. You will not find, Horatio, that such references will heighten your consequence among your neighbours."

"Neighbours," said he carelessly. "I have none. Or rather one, one only; and we agree together about as well as claret and oil may do."

"Sir Hilary?" inquired Mrs. Montfort. "Simon tells me some nonsense, that you have quarrelled with him. Do you never, Horatio, consider your duty as a parent? Do you not think of Melian?"

"I do," he answered dryly, "and for that reason I leave Pomfret out of my acquaintance."

Mrs. Montfort, a little taken aback, was not quieted.

"But the ball," said she, "—I do not refer to the entertainment in Assize week, which is pitifully crowded with nonentities—but there is to be a ball at Mawdry, after all these years. I have it on Mr. Galliard's authority; and in confidence, needless to relate, for it is to be a judicious affair. Care will be employed in extending the invitations."

"That is why you tell us, I suppose," said her brother. "A ball! Indeed!"

The smile roused by his sister's vehemence became less pleasant. Light faded from his eyes, leaving the lips still drawn thin.

"You may take it for truth," Mrs. Montfort nodded reproachfully, "and my niece the only young woman in the county who will not stand up at it."

"With brokers' men for partners," said he shortly. "She can do without such gaieties."

"Incredible!" said Mrs. Montfort, yet without the conviction that was used to sound in her voice. "What can be your meaning?"

"True," said her brother, "and you may take it on my authority, which is as good as Galliard's, I imagine."

"Sir Hilary in difficulties!" exclaimed Mrs. Montfort, not unwilling to be convinced of such scandal, and almost ready to exchange her ball for it. "Who could have surmised it?"

"Nobody," Horatio Forster answered. "Take comfort; you are not a day after the fair."

He broke off, biting his lip. His hands, which had been clenched on his lapels, loosened their grasp and came down tranquilly to his pockets, not without a glance that seemed to promise something in the future better worth their grip than cloth. Mrs. Montfort, meanwhile, interested almost beyond propriety, leaned forward in her chair and said with unction:

"Can I credit my ears? Is it confirmed, Horatio?"

"No," said he abruptly, as if angry with himself for having disclosed so much; "but it is probable. I do not tell you in confidence, since I do not wish to inform the whole countryside. I but say it in the ordinary way of talk, which leaves me with some faint hope that you may hold your tongue."

Then, seeing that her interest had been distracted from the original matter, and fearful lest he should lose the opportunity to tantalise, he went on:

"But this is not the urgent thing of which Melian spoke."

Mrs. Montfort's attention, however, had been so set upon the new course that it did not at once respond to this shifting of the helm.

"Incredible!" she repeated. "In debt! But what gentleman of Sir Hilary's position is not? And for the rest, I cannot think that his creditors would presume upon

the difficulty in which he finds himself. I do not anticipate minions of the law at the Mawdry ball. A Pomfret is hardly a Smith."

"A Pomfret is a fool," said he, "that throws his heritage down other men's pockets, down gutters, to please women——" he laughed, without amusement. "He is a gambler who has lost to commoners and tradesmen, and so has nothing to show for it. Why could he not lose to some Royal Highness or other, and get a trinket at least to wear on his breast at the opera?"

The manservant appeared at the door, and Forster, with a bow which deliberately he made awkward, offered one arm to his sister, and summoned with a glance his daughter to take the other.

"My arm, Julia," he invited her, "you need not hesitate, the sleeve is not cloth from my mills; you will not be contaminated. Come, Melian, you are hungry, I hope. You must get up your colour, if there are to be gaieties. But if you have set your cap at Sir Hilary, uncock it again. I'll buy you something better—a duke, if you're good, and have a mind to one. Julia, have you a grace ready? Say it then; for on my soul, I believe there is duckling."

IV

The duckling had gone its way, servants were setting the dishes for a second course. The first half of a well-cooked dinner, offered in orderly fashion, eaten with utensils having the authentic industrious sheen, had calmed Mrs. Montfort and soothed the teasing temper of her brother. There was appreciation, very little talk. The dinner promised well, but not sensationally. It should have been discovered and forgotten in an hour

or two, like its thousands of predecessors, had the second course gone the way of the first. But as the diners sat back to accommodate the changing dishes, the eye of Mrs. Montfort, who faced the window, was caught by the unexpected appearance of an equipage upon the drive, whose contradictions were too evident to escape comment.

It was a shabby vehicle, drawn by good horses; in it sat two men, dressed too well for their conveyance, and not well enough for their cattle. Their conduct was as incongruous as their appearance; for having driven to the front door and descended they did not at once knock, but after a colloquy separated; one going on foot towards the stables, the other waiting, it seemed, with his hand upon the knocker, which, when the stable-goer disappeared, he let fall with an energetic clap. Two glasses, standing close upon the table, gave out a faint tinkling sound, and Horatio Forster, puzzled by these manœuvres of the visitors, to which his sister had drawn attention, frowned and rose from his chair to survey the ancient chaise and the swarthy-chinned man standing at his door.

“Who the devil are they?” he asked of the universe, “and what the hell are they at?”

“The very question, though differently framed,” Mrs. Montfort replied, “which I was about to put to you.”

There was no way, save by waiting, to discover the answer. They waited, leaving untasted the superb pudding, mute tribute of Melian’s cook to a lady whose tastes were known and truckled to for ten miles round; waited, and Walter did not return, and the mystery of the visitors deepened.

“Papa, shall I go?” Melian asked.

"Sit down," said he, "whatever their business may be, it is not with you."

Then, suddenly, to Mrs. Montfort:

"How did you come? The usual thing—Frank driving?"

"Certainly," replied Mrs. Montfort, mystified.

"That's it, then," said he, with a glance at Melian, and a nod. "Quick work. Your harridan has lost no time. But no doubt they have other information besides."

Melian did not answer. The colour left her cheeks.

"But an information is soon laid," he went on, shrugging. "Well, Melian, you had better begin to make up your mind what you will swear. I wish we had Simon here. We shall have to drill him."

"Horatio," said Mrs. Montfort angrily, for to her his speech was without meaning, and she resented mysteries, "I should be obliged if you would have the goodness to exchange riddles for a general statement."

"Here it is, then," said he, returning to the table and sprawling carelessly into his chair. "These men that you see are runners, come from Pliny to collar your coachman. They missed him at Thrope, they have followed him here. They want him for breaking Sir Hilary's head with a stone. That should mean a vote of thanks and a grant; what it does mean is a rope, unless your husband and niece can bring themselves to a lie or two."

Mrs. Montfort spoke no word, but she quivered as though some hand had rudely plucked the string of her soul. Melian could follow the thoughts which that quivering concealed. Her coachman, a criminal! The coachman of the wife of the incumbent of a Pomfret living,

guilty of laying violent hands upon a Pomfret! Then the determination; Frank must be sworn off, proved innocent; no stain must rest upon Thrope. Then the question; which could best please Sir Hilary—the casting into darkness, instantly, of a suspected servant; or the proving innocent of that servant, with a deal of swearing and public contradicting of Sir Hilary? As Mrs. Montfort writhed upon the horns of this dilemma, the door opened at last.

“Well, Walter?” Horatio Forster asked, “what have you done with these fellows? I thought they had eaten you.”

But Walter’s eye was upon Mrs. Montfort; alarm was in it, a kind of sober fear.

“They are sorry to trouble the house, sir. The fact is—the coachman——”

Forster slapped his hand down upon the table.

“Frank, eh? They come for Frank, isn’t that what you’re boggling at? Julia, I was right, you see. It’s your concern. Had you not better tackle them?”

To his astonishment, Mrs. Montfort rose. The cap upon her head seemed to bridle as though it had been part of her, and she moved to the door, sweeping Walter before her. Her brother watched without reverence, and called, half in earnest:

“Come back! Finish your plateful! You’ll do no good, they have their warrant. Julia, don’t be a fool!”

Mrs. Montfort vouchsafed no reply, unless a question to Walter as to the intruder’s whereabouts might be counted an indirect answer; and when the murmured response reached her ear:

“Bring them to me!” she commanded, and stood in the doorway, hands clasped at her waist, motionless,

save for a faint persistent vibration of the lace upon her cap.

Melian and her father glanced at each other with the gay, yet fearful, eyes of schoolboys who wait to see a fellow-scholar birched.

"Whew!" cried he, whistling softly and making a comical face, "I must give the poor devils a drink when she's done with them. Here they come. Now for it!"

He filled his glass and leaned back in his chair, grinning. A shuffling of feet was heard in the hall; above this, a voice.

"Gentlemen!" said the voice (and "Offal!" said the tone), "what is your purpose?"

A lesser voice responded, with a tinny twang to it like a post-boy's horn; a small perky voice, difficult to boom down; having a cork-like impertinent quality which pleased Horatio Forster's ear, and promised a good set-to.

"Ma'am," it replied, "we're doing of our duty, with apologies for any disturbance caused in the performance of same."

"Do you represent the law?" inquired Mrs. Montfort; and the listeners could suppose her glance sweeping the victims from head to foot, summing them up and making of them nothing; ciphers, zeros.

"Laws," the tinny voice assented, "law, order, Justices of the Peace, Parliament, and the whole bag o' tricks; including King George by the grace of God, and pursuant to the Act of 1793."

This undaunted reply caused the listeners to fear for Mrs. Montfort's dignity and their own composure; which latter was somewhat shaken by Mrs. Montfort's next attack.

"Acts!" said she, very loudly. "Acts of Parliament! Consider, sir, those of the Apostles. Recall the history of Paul and Silas, wrongly apprehended: 'And when it was day, the magistrates sent the Serjeants, saying: Let those men go.'"

"That may be so, or it mayn't," returned the voice, unmoved. "But that's religion, that is, and this is felony; two different things, lady, however you may think."

"Different," Mrs. Montfort echoed, gasping. "Not to be mentioned in the same breath——"

"She admits it," the voice triumphantly claimed. "Then don't you go for to mix 'em, lady. Apostles is one thing and felons is another. Never forget it. I never forget it. How'd it be if they sent me out to bring in a cove for larceny and I come home with a Bishop? What'd happen to me? And wouldn't I deserve it? Now, ma'am, stand off. Step lively, Halfpenny."

"Frank!" Mrs. Montfort exhorted. She was beaten, and knew it, but she had breath left. "How can you have exposed yourself and your employers to these overbearing pettifoggers?"

Frank's voice was heard, sullen and heavy:

"They're within their rights, ma'am. They've showed a warrant."

"That's it," the tinny voice took him up, "and a warrant can't be resisted without incurring such penalties as are appointed under—what's the Act, Joe?"

"Gord knows," replied a third voice, so ponderously bass that the listeners started. "But it don't signify. Ma'am, stand out of the way."

There was a sound of advancing feet and a sudden word of command.

"Would you lay hands upon me?" inquired Mrs. Montfort, in horror, starting back into view.

"Only in the way of duty, ma'am," the tinny voice assured her, in a tone that might well go with an ogle. "Nothing more, for the present."

"He wins," said Horatio Forster, and set down his glass. "He wins with a flank attack. I must go out and rescue Julia from this Bow Street Boney."

He went out, and from the hall Melian heard the cry of the vanquished.

"They will take him, Horatio. They are ruthless. My prayers have effected nothing—he goes. And now, pray, who is to drive me home?"

Melian listened no longer, but darting to the window saw the group of men come down the steps. Frank, trim and orderly in his livery, with a new hat—cockaded, Mrs. Montfort's pride—had nothing of a malefactor's air. Seeing him so quiet between the two runners, mounting the chaise, buttoning his coat, she found it hard to understand that these were the last gestures he was to make in freedom. As for the other alternative, that she could not picture; she could not imagine that the events of the next few weeks might put beyond his power, and forever, even such simple actions as these.

The horses were whipped up, the chaise jerked forward, came to a smoother pace, and swung out of sight round the corner, where the gibbet had stood.

V

Melian had forgotten her father's hint of junketings to come; but the event proved that he had worked the thought in his mind, with his habitual secrecy. He was proud of her looks, she knew; and it pleased him to

exercise even vicarious power through her beauty. He planned therefore, after his fashion; which was, to determine swiftly, and set to work secretly to achieve. Until his plans were mature, he would deny their existence; he liked to come out with a project finished and smooth; to astonish, and overwhelm. So much of his temper these months of his company had taught his daughter; and therefore his surprise when it came was expected, though not anticipated.

She happened upon him one evening in the small lobby. He had ridden into Pliny in the morning, and after a day mysteriously spent, returned smiling; and was, when she found him, standing with his heel in the jack, removing his boots. On a chair beside him lay a great parcel, done up in a cover of wax-cloth, with coach-labels on it.

"Take that away," said he, directing her eyes, with a jerk of the head, to the parcel. "It is for you."

"For me?" Melian asked, her finger and thumb picking already at the knots.

"I do not know who else. I should look well in pink satin. Take your parcel away, and yourself. How else am I to swear at my boots in comfort?"

He tugged his foot upward, and the boot came off suddenly, so that he went backwards into the chair.

"There now," said he with an angry grunt. "It is enough to give a man apoplexy. Go away, and let me have the use of my tongue."

Melian went, still fumbling at her parcel, to her bedroom; arrived there, and the parcel opened, a ball dress fell from it, superb even in its creases, a magnificence of peach-coloured silk and silver. Melian had never possessed such a garment, but as she held it against her

came the remembrance of having worn a dress as little countrified as this not long ago. When that memory came, with its pictures of Mawdry and the face of Mrs. Dest, she let the silk rustle down to the ground, and stood unhappily; for her father must have ordered that other dress, too, and given it otherwise, not in the intervals between oaths, and standing half in, half out of his boots. Melian put her hands to her eyes; the pictures shamed her that thronged to her mind; and she marvelled how events which in books appear unnatural, being lived, become familiar, the ordinary stuff of life.

Outside the door her father's voice called:

"Well, does it fit? Let me see how you look."

"I'm not ready. It's difficult to——"

"Let me hook you. I'm handy with pins."

"Not yet. I'm not ready."

She heard him grumble a little, and spoke hurriedly to appease him.

"It fits perfectly, Papa—no need for pins. Wait in the drawing-room. I want to make a grand entrance."

He went away and she picked up the gown. It was difficult to fasten, with a tight and intricate bodice, but was done at last, after some striving; and looking into the glass at her own splendour, undimmed even by the black day shoes peeping beneath, she was awed, as by her reflection in Mrs. Dest's red dress. She curtseyed low to herself, and ran downstairs, preening.

Meeting Walter in the hall, she imagined, suddenly, a way to surprise in her turn, and having learned that her father was in the drawing-room, told the man to announce a visitor. Waiting outside the door, she heard their dialogue.

"A visitor, sir, to see you. A lady."

"Ah! Her name?"

"She won't give it, sir. She asks for you, most particular and private."

"What do you say?" Very sharply, this. "Where does she come from?"

An unguessable impulse caused the man to answer, with the name of the only great house he knew,

"Mawdry way, sir, I believe."

Then a silence. It seemed to Melian that her father had risen from his chair.

"I won't see her!" This upon a shout.

Walter prepared to withdraw, but Forster's voice held him, calling in a kind of distress:

"Wait, you fool! Ask this woman—no! No, by God! Let her go."

He ended with an exclamation in another tone; for Melian could listen no longer and ran in past Walter, gleaming in her finery. Her father met her with so much of a smile as he could contrive, but she had surprised in his face a look of eagerness, almost of hunger; the left hand still snapped finger and thumb softly in perplexity, and he was stepping forward. The trick had caught him unawares, at a moment when his thoughts were reaching out towards the other woman for whom he had bought dresses, and Melian knew very well, from his look, how that dark lady of his trouble was named. She understood, too, that he could not forget nor learn indifference towards her, however earnestly his age and the woman's treachery might urge it. This knowledge came so instantly that it had not time to check her pace or to change her smile. He, too, was instantly controlled. He was stepping forward; he came to meet her, the restless hand halted to offer her a chair.

"Well, madam," said he, carrying on the comedy, "to what do I owe this honour?"

But she could not go on with it. She took refuge in reality.

"Papa, it's beautiful, and it fits—look! But, you know, it is too grand for Pliny. This is for London, and the opera. No one here will have such a grand dress. They will laugh at me."

"You are to wear it, for all that," said he, proudly surveying her. "And who will laugh? I will not have you go to the Assize Ball dressed like a country crow."

"I wish I might not go at all," said she, suddenly putting her discomfort into words. "I know nobody. Who will stand up with me? Papa, why must I go?"

"You are mad, I think," he answered with a laugh. "A girl with a fine new dress!"

"I mean it," said she, standing her ground, but with one hand upon the embroideries at her heart. "We had better not go."

At this there came a frown above the smile.

"Say what you mean," he commanded. "You are shy, is that it? It is time you got over such silliness." She stumbled on.

"I mean, that it will be difficult for us. We are not known. We have this house, this land, and you are rich; but we have no place. It will be awkward——"

"Is there no master of the ceremonies? Don't be afraid, I'll find you men."

"But you don't understand how it will be. If there is a master of the ceremonies—to whom can he introduce me? You have quarrelled with Sir Hilary. His friends will not know us. And the others will not know what to make of us."

Now, unexpectedly, he struck in, with a quiet, angry voice:

"What are you saying? Do you wish to stand up with Sir Hilary? He will do it, if I order him."

Melian looked at him, perplexed, wondering if already he had been at his wine. He answered the look.

"I am not drunk. Understand me—if we go to this ball, there will be a place made for you, and partners for you to dance with. What, good God! do you tell me that an heiress of forty thousand pounds will lack dancers? You are to have so much when you marry, and more when I die. Money, Melian! If there is anything worth having in this life—and I do not say that there is, but if there is anything, money will obtain it. Love, wit, health even; faithful service——"

He broke off, remembering the woman who had left him, and with bitterness resumed:

"Servants and such trash will leave sometimes to go where there are honours; but then one may buy the honours, too, and so have them back."

Melian, unhappy because she had followed his thought too clearly, stood with hanging head. Her father approached and patted her shoulder roughly, as he might have soothed one of his horses grown restive.

"You are a good girl," said he, "but missish still. What will you do with forty thousand pounds when you have it? What kind of husband will you buy?"

"I don't want one that's bought."

"A love-match, is that what you hanker for? Then don't let the rumour of your money get abroad. It is hard enough in the ordinary way for a man to know if

he loves a woman truly; but when to her person is added a fortune, it would puzzle the devil himself to label his feelings aright."

VI

Alice, trim in her clean print gown, not bulky yet, was not often to be caught and spoken to. She was up earlier than any of the household. Melian, waking with the light, could hear, in the room below her own, the knock of the broom-head, the shifting of chairs, and knew that it was Alice, working to escape from the burden of her own body and mind. During the rest of the day she seemed to hide; and if discovered by chance in a passage, she would edge up against the wall sideways, and hurry by. Spoken to, she hardly answered. She was dumb as an animal, and clever as an animal at hiding.

Thus it happened that when, one morning, Horatio Forster sent an instant order from his study for the girl to come, she could not be found by Walter, sent to search. Melian, talking with the cook in her storeroom, heard with astonishment the manservant's apologies for intruding; he was obliged, he said, to look everywhere for Alice; the master required her urgently—the master, and the lawyer gentleman from Pliny.

"She's not here," said Melian, surprised.

She told him to search in the outbuildings and the kitchen garden; and disregarding the stiff disapproval expressed in the cook's attitude, locked the cupboards and went upstairs. Halfway up, at the second turn of the landing, a door was set in the wall, a place where housemaids' brushes and pails were kept. Inexplicably

Melian paused by this door. There was nothing strange about it to compel her attention, for she passed it twenty times a day, and it looked as usual. Nevertheless, she paused, and on an impulse pulled open the door. Alice was sitting there, on an upturned pail, not crying, not in any way violent; just sitting, with her hands in her lap, in the dark. Melian, controlling her surprise, called her. Obediently the girl came stooping out. Seeing her dazed, Melian wasted no time in argument, but bade her follow; and so brought her, unresisting and silent, to her father's room.

He sat at his desk in that small and stuffy place, very little bigger than Alice's retreat on the stairs, and a gentleman in black sat by him, his hat filled with papers on his knees. This person rose as Melian entered: her father did not rise nor change his position; only looked up without moving his head, which was sunk on his breast, and pushed his underlip forward.

"Well," said he, "here you are. You have taken your time, miss. My daughter, Scatchard; and this other is the girl."

The lawyer bowed and offered Melian his chair, dusting it first—a habit that had grown upon him in an untended office—with the silk handkerchief from his tail-pocket.

"Delighted to have this pleasure," said he, in the false creaking voice of one doing business with a woman, "and how do you find this neighbourhood, Miss Forster? After London, a little dull perhaps? But, no doubt, salubrious——"

Horatio Forster broke in impatiently.

"Sit down, sit down, both of you. Let us not waste time."

Mr. Scatchard, looking about him, discovered another chair, which, with a careful parting of the coat-tails, he took, placing his hat beneath it. Alice stood, her hands hanging by her sides, finger and thumb restlessly pleating the stuff of her dress.

"Begin," Forster commanded, with a nod to the lawyer.

Mr. Scatchard coughed, and took up a questioning attitude; one shin cocked across the other knee for ease, finger tips together to give sobriety.

"There is a question," said he, addressing Alice, "which no doubt you will be willing to answer. It concerns the statement alleged to have been made by your respectable mother, which has resulted, I understand, in some inconvenience for a certain young man——"

Mr. Scatchard looked at Alice in a knowing way; she gazed back blankly. Forster interposed.

"She does not understand you," said he. "That sort of thing is all very well for judges, and such as like their facts wrapped up in cotton. Let me talk."

The lawyer shrugged, and let his hands drop to his knee.

"Listen to me," Forster went on, roughly, "do you want Frank to hang?"

The girl quivered once like some patient animal struck with a whip, but made no answer.

"Of course you don't. You want a wedding-ring, like a sensible girl, and a name for your child——"

The lawyer coughed, and his eye travelled meaningly to Melian.

"Let be," said Forster, taking his meaning and brushing it aside. "Melian knows that children are not found under bushes. Now, Alice, do you hear me? I want the

truth from you. Don't be afraid; we are on Frank's side. Did he strike Sir Hilary, or no? Was he in the mob, or no?"

Alice bit her lip and muttered something.

"I can't hear that. What do you say?"

"She said, so far as I understood, that he was with the carriage," said the lawyer.

"Earlier he was; and later, after my daughter and Mr. Montfort came back. In the meantime, where?"

Alice began to blubber; Forster checked her by a movement. For the first time since they had entered he changed his position. His hands joined, and slid forward towards her across the table; above them came jutting his head, chin thrust out, nostrils arching.

"I am to know the truth of this. You know it, you slut, and I'll get it from you——"

"You are too violent, Mr. Forster," interposed the lawyer, "too violent, sir. We do not intimidate witnesses."

"Do you not? More fool you, when you deal with witnesses like this. We must have the facts, we must know where we are to lie——"

"How we may put the matter in the best light."

"As you like. But we must know the truth in order to avoid it—or to use it."

He turned to Alice once more.

"Once more. Was Frank among the rioters?"

No answer.

"You do not leave this room until I hear what I want. Was Frank among them?"

No answer.

"You'll go to gaol unless I get my answer. This gentleman is a lawyer, it is his business to gaol people——"

"Sir, you are alarming the girl unnecessarily. She does not understand you."

"What need is there for her to understand? These people must be driven like cattle."

Melian could stand it no longer.

"Papa, don't you see, she thinks you mean harm to Frank."

"I have told her I do not."

"But she cannot see it——"

"Be quiet. Don't meddle."

Melian's temper flared on the instant.

"It is you who are meddling. Do you think any woman will give up her lover's secret?"

"Indeed," said he, with a sneer, "and what, pray, may you know of lovers' secrets?"

"I am a woman, too——"

"I should judge so," said he coldly, "by your folly."

She stood, with the tears contracting her throat, hands clenched, in front of Alice as though to protect her. Horatio Forster, leaning suddenly forward across the table, caught her wrist tightly.

"Do not get in my way," said he. "Do as you're told. Stand aside."

And he threw her hand from him, beckoning to Alice. But his touch set a spark to the last of his daughter's rage.

"You dare," said she, stammering. "I will not have you touch me."

"Go out of this room," he ordered her.

"I won't leave her here for you to bully. I won't go. A woman—yes, you are very brave against women. Against men you can only contrive, and plot——"

"You fool!" said he.

"I know what it is that you are trying to do. And I won't swear anything. I won't lie, to help your quarrel with Sir Hilary. I won't help you. I'll tell what I know to the judges——"

"And hang Frank," said he, grimly.

At that the silent Alice suddenly wailed, and dropped to her knees with her hands clasping Melian's feet. No words came through her sobbing, but she moaned.

"You see," said Forster, nodding down at the figure huddled in abandonment. "Well, what now? Did I not tell you to hold your tongue?"

"Useless at present," said the lawyer in a low voice, "useless to question the woman. She is hysterical, I fear. I suggest that we dismiss her, and proceed to enlist your daughter's help."

Melian, half lifting, brought Alice to her knees; but she would not stand, and buried her face in Melian's dress, while the pitiful murmur went on, wordless. Anger could not live and persist in its vehement resolve against the plea of swollen lips and desperate eyes.

"Don't cry any more," said Melian at last; and lifting the girl upright, pressed down the fair head to her shoulder with a gesture as instinctive to woman as the clenching and withdrawing of the fist to man. "Don't cry any more. They shan't hurt Frank, I promise. Go away now, and don't be afraid. They shall not frighten you again."

This she said, looking straight over the girl's head into her father's eyes. He made no answer, save for a glance like that of a duellist measuring his opponent. The lawyer began to talk smoothly, saying very little, making legal nothings of the passions under his nose.

"Quite so," said he. "No need, no need at all for us

to force this evidence. It is hearsay, after all, it proves nothing. What this poor fellow may have told his sweetheart proves nothing. It would be convenient, certainly, to be sure, one way or another. But if we have no proof of innocence, we have no proof of guilt. I think we may do very well. Yes, I believe that this unfortunate young woman may dry her tears——”

So he prattled, while Alice, with a step that swayed, went from the room; and father and daughter stood facing each other, silent as enemies.

“We have wasted a good deal of Mr. Scatchard’s time,” said Forster, breaking in, “but he may not grudge it. There is not often play-acting of this quality to be seen in the provinces. But we are to be serious now. Sit down. Let us outline our plan of campaign.”

Melian obeyed, looking down at her fingers clasped on her lap. Near the knee, on her dress, were stains of tears not yet dried, darkening the stuff. Her father went on:

“Since you promised the girl, I take it that you are with me in this. Frank is to be saved.”

“If he is innocent.”

“Innocent! Of course he is not innocent. But he is a better man than the fellow he struck, and deserves to be free. Now, as to the means——”

“I won’t tell lies to the judges. What would be the use? I should stumble and blush. I should not know what to say. They would soon find out the truth.”

“Do you think we should trust you to invent? The statement will be prepared. All you have to do is to learn it off pat. A blush or two as you go will do no harm.”

The lawyer interposed.

"I may say, Miss Forster, I have little doubt that the accusation against this worthy man is a malicious invention. Indeed, you can prove that it is so, your father has told me of your interview with this young woman's mother, which, of course, must form part of your evidence——"

"She kept silence, because she thought he was to marry Alice. When he would not do it, she told the truth to be revenged."

"Permit me; you do not know it to be the truth. You know only what the woman said, and you admit that she is actuated by malice. She is prepared to swear a man's life away falsely. Do you not think you should counter that? Is it not your duty to confute a false oath?"

"To bear false witness myself——"

"To save a man's life?" quietly said the lawyer.

Her father broke into a loud laugh.

"Parsonage-bred, you see. Shibboleths for thoughts. You waste time, Scatchard, talking principles to a woman."

"If it were that," Melian cried back at him, "if it were to save Frank—but you do it for spite, you want to use me for your quarrel——"

She broke off, he looking dangerously at her, daring her to say aloud his real purpose; then muttered:

"You can get plenty of other witnesses. You can buy witnesses to swear what you want."

"Ho, ho, ho," said her father, "so that's how you talk. This is your parsonage morality. You won't lie, but you don't care who else may do it. You don't care, eh? who else may be damned, so long as you're safe. Well, you shall have it, an ocean of false witness. A hundred lies instead of one. What's that you say?"

For Melian was persisting that if Frank were innocent the judges could not condemn him.

"Do you suppose a Pomfret is to have his hat knocked off in his own county, and no man swing for it? Two is the least they can do with. Make up your mind, Frank will hang unless we can find witnesses of a quality to set up against the baronet and his led-captain."

He rose, and walking to the window stood for a time looking out; then, half turning with one arm extended, in the very attitude of a duellist on the word to fire:

"There are two things you may do; two courses open. You may come to the witness-box and make a statement, which for aught you know may be true; actually, you saw nothing of the man, know nothing of his movements. Or you may refuse to speak. (You have your summons, and must give evidence, whether you like it or not.) In this case, I shall, as you suggest, bribe men who were not present to swear what I tell them. I believe that your testimony will save Frank; the other—since I cannot offer to buy persons of any consequence or weight—will lose him. There is your choice; a half-truth, and a life: lies, and a man's death, both chargeable upon you. Think a little. Take your time. But you shall choose, one way or the other, before you leave this room."

He turned quite away, and roughly plucking a book from one of the shelves, laid it open upon his hand, and seemed to read it steadily. The lawyer fixed his eyes upon his fingers, tapping them together, and frowning. Melian sat quietly, while her mind revolved anger, and revolt at her own powerlessness, and her father's cold words, and Alice's tears upon her hands. She sat, while minutes went by, beating down her pride that hated

to submit to force, getting the better of her temper; and having these under control, spoke:

"I will do it. I will swear."

The lawyer disjoined his hands. Horatio Forster walked to the desk, and slammed down his book upon it.

"At last," said he. "That's reasonable. You have sense to know when you are beaten; and that," looking at her with a kind of respect, "is the beginning of a good fighter."

"Come then, madam," said the lawyer, in the smooth voice, soothing to feminine susceptibilities, that he had first used, "will you give yourself the trouble of looking over this paper? It is shockingly written; crabbed, very crabbed. But ladies are often good at deciphering these scrawls. *Billets-doux* are often scribbled in haste, ha, ha! Now, these are the questions you will in all probability be asked——"

VII

She was to declare that before she entered the carriage at Thrope, she had talked with Frank, while waiting for her uncle.

"So I did. I did speak to him."

And had the conversation been observed? She thought so. Overheard? No. Excellent; then they could proceed. Now, in this conversation it was possible, was it not, that Halfpenny might have asked the direction the drive was to take? He knew already, she said, that they were to drive to Danbury. So much the better. Now, was it a fact that his father resided not so very far from Danbury Farm, a mile and a half or so beyond? It might be so; she did not know. It was so, Miss Forster might take his word for it. Was it not very natural that Frank,

knowing he was to be in that direction, should form the project of visiting his father? Was it not very probable that during this conversation before her uncle arrived he should have asked if the wait at Danbury would be long?

"He might have; but he did not."

"'He might have.' That will be answer enough."

To resume: Miss Forster might have told him—very truly—that she did not know whether they might wait one hour, or two; it would depend on the progress of the excavations.

"If he had asked me, that is what I should have said."

"We are supposing that he did ask you. We are trying to help your recollection. It is probable, is it not, that Frank should have asked such a question?"

"Yes; but——"

"Then let us take it that he did ask. And let us take it that you answered as we have suggested; very properly, very rightly. After which Frank said, with a sigh perhaps—'It would be an opportunity for me to see again my old white-haired father,' or words to the effect."

Involuntarily, Melian smiled at this, as did Forster.

"Why not?" the lawyer asked, in surprise.

"It has not the usual tang of coachmen's talk," said Forster. "Go on."

Melian was to suppose that such a statement had been made. Immediately, then, her uncle had come out upon the steps, in a hurry to be off.

"He did. That is true."

"You see how easy it is. How very little—deviation is required. Circumstances only require a turn to tell for instead of against the prisoner. It is the same, my

daughters tell me, with a lady's dress. A flounce two inches too high—failure! Two inches down, the same flounce—and the wearer secures as many partners as she has time for. Is not this true?"

"I don't know, sir. I never go to balls."

"We must change that"—from Forster, "we must try this effect of flounces."

Proceeding, the lawyer made it clear to her what had happened at Danbury. When she and her uncle descended from the carriage, they went at once, in haste, up the lane. Frank called, asking Mr. Montfort how long he was to wait, but was not heeded. She, Melian, however, heard.

"I suggest that you heard Frank call, 'Sir, sir,'—just in that manner, anxiously—'how long am I to wait?'"

"If he had, my uncle would have heard, and told him."

"But since your uncle did not hear?"

"I myself should have called his attention."

"Exactly; and this is what you did. But your uncle, in his impatience, did not stop to answer. Is he not sometimes very absent?"

"Yes. When it is convenient for him not to hear, sometimes he does not."

"Just so. You spoke to him, then. He did not answer. You did not repeat the question, thinking the matter to be of no great importance; but you turned, and shook your head at Frank, as much as to say that no hour could be allotted for departure. Then, still following in Mr. Montfort's steps, you arrived at the farmhouse."

The lawyer dipped his pen afresh, and said with solemnity:

"Now, madam. Can you recall any item, any small

particularity of this farmhouse? Anything in the nature of the buildings? Any flowers? Anything, in short, which may have struck your mind. I ask you now to be exact in your recollection."

Melian was surprised, and took time to answer.

"It is like all other houses here; grey stone, with barns making the wings."

"Do you recollect nothing specially? The knocker, for example; or the whereabouts of the pump?"

"I remember the pump. It stands by the front door instead of the back, where it would be more convenient."

"Ah!" Mr. Scatchard wrote carefully. "And can you describe this pump? The colour of it?"

"Green. Not newly painted. But I cannot see how such a thing can help——"

"Pardon me," the lawyer condescended, "such details are of untold value. Let me make clear to you how the mind of the judge regards them."

He took a great breath, widening his shoulders as though he felt the ermine and the long wig upon them.

"The judge thinks, 'Here is a young lady whose accurate eye notes in passing the exact position, colour, and state of repair of an object so very ordinary as a pump. If she has observed this object so faithfully, it is not to be supposed that she will be deceived in more serious matters, to which her full attention has been given.' There, in two words, you have the importance of detail."

Mr. Scatchard let the ermine fall, and, refreshed by its wearing, even in imagination, blandly resumed, to find himself soon in a difficulty. For his witness would not be tractable, would not be feminine, would not

accept his assurances of her very natural failure to retain her full wits. He told her, first, that when she perceived the mob advancing she had screamed. She would not have it. He asserted that, further, she had swooned away. This she denied. He reproached her for being so unladylike as to retain her senses when every circumstance called upon her to lose them; but she would not yield. The most she would confess was to a feeling of excitement and a quick-beating heart; as for the mob, she hardly saw it, for Sir Hilary's horse was all the time in the way.

"Well," said Mr. Scatchard ruefully, "it will have to do, I suppose. But I should have preferred to have you display a greater sensibility. Now we come to the crucial question. When you returned to the place where you left the carriage, was Frank waiting?"

"No. We waited for him; and then my uncle went out again in the rain to look for him."

"I believe you are mistaken."

"If I can see a pump so clearly, I can see a carriage. I know he was not there."

"Not actually on the box, perhaps. But he was not far away. Indeed, he cannot have been far away; for when, twenty minutes later, they brought Sir Hilary down, he was there then."

"Yes, but I did not see him come. I was in the house."

"Ah! And why did you go to the house? Was it not, must it not have been, to inform your uncle that Frank had returned?"

Melian looked at him, and at her father. The latter nodded.

"Yes, you may look. It has been an easy road so far. This is the thumping lie. Can you manage it? Remem-

ber, you are at liberty to blush as often as you choose."

"Certainly, certainly," the lawyer assented, with most ingratiating swiftness, "but there will be no cause for blushes. This is not perjury. This is merely piecing together, the filling up of an otherwise fatal gap in the evidence. Frank did return; you might have seen him. If you had seen him, you would have observed the direction from which he came. Now, he did not come from the west, from the direction of Danbury Hill. Why? Because that was the direction from which you and your uncle came; and had he done so, you must have seen him. Is it not very likely that he must have come from the south; that is to say, from the direction in which his father lives?"

"How should I know?" asked Melian bluntly. "Why do you not ask his father if Frank was with him?"

"Unfortunately," said the lawyer, hum-humming, "we cannot say that this visit actually took place. But that Frank intended it, I think we cannot in honesty question."

And he went on to describe Frank, left lonely upon his box. "The horse is fed. He is without occupation. His eyes follow the swelling plain in the direction of his childhood's home. Suddenly the impulse comes, to revisit that 'loveliest village of the plain.' He knows that on Danbury there is much to be done; that his master cannot be back under an hour. Half an hour will take him to his father's side. A hand-clasp, a question or two, and then the swift return. In a trice he decides; he sets out. But there is one thing that he has left out of his calculations; and what is that? The rain; the sudden, drenching, steady rain, rendering imperative his mas-

ter's return to the shelter of the carriage. Frank, half-way to his destination, pauses, deliberates. Eventually his duty overcomes his filial affection—rightly, since to a master is delegated a parent's authority—and he returns without having accomplished his purpose. This is the reason why, when you saw him approaching the carriage after your uncle's departure, he was coming from the south."

The lawyer paused, fearing objections. None came. Encouraged, he went on:

"Upon this, seeing him, you impulsively ran towards the farmhouse, to warn your uncle of his coachman's arrival——"

But his relief came too soon. Melian, entering into the spirit of the game, was determined, since she must lie, that no improbability should trip her. Her lie should be a very Gibraltar of lies, impregnable, if it were to be told at all. She interrupted him, therefore.

"Why should I do that? Why did I not send Frank himself to my uncle?"

"Because," the lawyer answered, in a waggish, reprehending tone, "you are impulsive. You share, too, the very usual failing of your sex, curiosity. Your uncle had been gone some time. You were inquisitive——"

"Inquisitive, no!"

"Then what other reason had you? For you did, in fact, go to the farmhouse. That will be remembered. That we cannot deny. You went there, and were seen."

She was silent.

"But since you do not care to have it appear that curiosity was your motive, here is this other, ready to your hand. Pray accept it. You went to the farmhouse to inform your uncle of Frank's return."

"But when I saw my uncle there, I said nothing of Frank."

"Very naturally. Recollect, Miss Forster, the sight that greeted your eyes when you entered this house. You saw, did you not, Sir Hilary Pomfret lying wounded? Do you mean to tell me that your senses could support such a sight? I suggest that when the horrid scene met your eyes you lost all memory of your purpose; and clinging to some gentleman's arm, were led away."

Melian began at this to look stubborn; and Mr. Scatchard hastily amended his version.

"Or rather, let us say, you did not refer to Frank, because more important matters were before you. That which claimed your attention, your womanly care, was the terrible condition of Sir Hilary. You could think, very rightly, of nothing else; and accordingly, when, with a flash of intuition, you proposed the carriage to convey him home, it did not occur to you to state the apparently obvious fact that with the carriage was a coachman."

She did not contradict him.

"For this offer of yours, I have the word of Mr. Finn. You see, I have made inquiries, and, now I recall, your humane and timely offer was the subject of much comment. You accompanied to the carriage Sir Hilary and his bearers. Now, as to the attitude of Frank. Do you recall it?"

"He helped to put a covering over Sir Hilary. I do not remember him otherwise."

"Helped to put a covering; no signs of guilt; just properly concerned. When the unfortunate gentleman is bestowed, he mounts his box, cracks his whip—and

there, madam, ends this very crucial evidence of yours."

He laid down his pen, smiling, his lips stretched tightly and wide.

"And there it is. Not so very difficult, I think. No perjury, you see. Merely an extending, as it were, of your memory, for the purpose of saving a good man, and trusty servant, from the gallows."

"We must keep dark the matter of the girl," Forster interposed, "if he is to keep up that character. And we must find a witness who saw him going or coming back across those fields."

"Not easy to find," said the lawyer, "it is a lonely part, and the men, most of them, were at Danbury."

"Well?" Forster took him up. "And the women? They were at home, I imagine. You may easily buy talk from a woman with five guineas; her silence is another matter. Have you a map? There is a cottage by Damers Copse; that would be on his way."

The lawyer made a note; then looked up, with a hand at his mouth.

"There is the Danbury woman, Mrs. Goard. She is their main witness. Possibly a guinea or two there——"

"You will not buy that harridan with money. But she is afraid for the farm, afraid they will be turned out unless she throws Sir Hilary his victim. She does not dare to swear against her landlord."

"No," the lawyer agreed glumly, "that is our capital difficulty."

"You are mistaken," Forster corrected him, "it is our trump card."

"You mean——?" Scatchard asked with a quick turn of his head.

"She will not go against her landlord," Forster re-

peated, and with that seemed to put the question aside. He thrust his hands into his pockets, eyeing his daughter, and addressed her directly.

"Well? Can you do it? You have told more lies than this in an afternoon, at one of your aunt's tea parties."

"I have told you, I will do it," she answered impatiently.

"Have you got all the points clearly? Mr. Scatchard shall write out a memorandum——"

"No, no," said the lawyer, hastily, "nothing in writing——"

"Then you must put her through the catechism now, once more. I will not trust to a memory trained on poetry, where one word will do as well as another. We must have this pat. Scatchard, begin again. Melian, sit down. I will listen, and see if her answers are convincing."

He sat upon the corner of the table, and putting a heavy hand upon his daughter's arm, drew Melian down again into her chair. The lawyer shuffled his papers, which were covered with a kind of shorthand, and began at his first question.

"When did you first see Frank Halfpenny on that day?"

"Before we left Thrope. He brought the carriage to the door at about two o'clock, or a little later."

"Did you then have any conversation with him?"

"He asked me, while we waited for my uncle, if we would remain long at Danbury that afternoon. I answered that I could not tell, that it must depend on my uncle, and on the progress of the digging."

For half an hour more, the questions and answers went on.

VIII

The lawyer took dinner at the Toll House before returning to his Pliny lodgings. Talk at the table was pitched in a key suitable to feminine ears. Mr. Scatchard, putting aside, like the imaginary judge's robe, his manner of the morning, amiably discussed such topics as dress, the London actors, and the depletion of beaux caused by the late war.

"There are not so many of them," said Forster, "but the quality is better. Those that are left are all heroes."

"They are," bitterly agreed the lawyer, "and I may say so to you, sir, I deplore the fact. What are we to do with them when they come back? They have been cutting throats with the approbation of their King and country for the past ten years; I believe it will take them time to lose the habit. We may look forward, sir, in my opinion, to an increase, during the next few years, of violence and crime. Already the roads are not safe, and this attack with which we are concerned, this Danbury affair, is no isolated instance. I do not wish to alarm Miss Forster unduly. The judges may be trusted to protect the community; but I believe that these young warriors, with their claims and their grievances, and their impatience with civil life, are going to make existence excessively uncomfortable for us all."

"I will not complain of the war," said Forster, caressing the fine glass beside his hand, "it feathers as many nests as it scatters. But I agree that the peace is a danger. There should be some substitute for war; human ingenuity should be equal to finding it out. There might be some large neutral island—Ireland would do; it

serves no other purpose—where the hot-heads of all nations might go to break each other's crowns at their own cost."

"A good notion," said the lawyer with a sigh. "I do not know how my son, when he returns, will sit down again to his articles." Then, to Melian, "And peace hits the ladies hard, too, for off go the red coats, and the gold lace, and everything that makes an enviable partner. It is something of a disaster all round."

Melian left them soon to their wine.

It was a good while later that she heard in the hall footsteps, and sounds of departure, and a few sentences exchanged.

"And Myers' bill—what of that?"

"I can buy it in, in time. We are in touch. But it will cost money. If he should come to learn of your project, it will cost more."

"How should he learn? You do not use my name?"

"No. But these lenders are all acquainted. There gets about a rumour that some person is paying a good price for all Pomfret bills. They are sharp fellows, they draw conclusions."

"Not so sharp, if they lend to that squeezed orange."

"Well, but you know, who buys in haste buys dear."

"Value is according to the desire to possess. If I pay my whole fortune and get what I want, I have bought cheap. Go on, I say, finish it."

"As you please. I try to save your pocket where I can."

"Thank you; but do not save it at the expense of my main object. Good-night. It is a pleasant night for a ride."

Mr. Scatchard having gone, Forster came to his daughter's drawing-room, and stood looking down on her bent head as she worked at her netting. Melian would not speak to him. She had not forgiven his cruelty to Alice, nor his bringing her to a dilemma where, whether she spoke or kept silence, her conscience must reproach her. She went on with her work, therefore, and beyond looking up for an instant as he entered, gave no other sign that she was aware of him. At last she felt a tug at one of her dark curls. He held it to pull her head his way, laughing at her helplessness, for it was impossible to resist without a ridiculous and painful struggle. Passively she turned her head, but would not meet his eyes. He tugged more sharply; still she kept the lids low. There came a series of tugs, each one a little harder than the last, so that she cried out, and put up a hand to hide the momentary tears of pain. At this he let her go, saying:

"Why will you be obstinate? Do not bear me a grudge. You see how the whole business hangs upon you. You are the king-pin."

"Why do you touch it at all?" said she, taking up her work once more with fingers that trembled; "why do you not let it alone?"

"I need occupation," said he, "let me have my fun."

"Your fun!" she answered. "Yes. You do not have to be questioned and tormented——"

"You'll have no tormenting. I'll see to that."

"—and for nothing. Uselessly!"

"Why do you say that?" he asked, sharply.

"A magistrate attacked! A man owning half the county!" she answered with something of the magniloquence of her aunt Julia. "He can turn all the wit-

nesses you may buy out of their homes if they go against him."

"He cannot turn you. Indeed, it may be the other way about——"

"How do you mean?"

"Nothing," he answered, brushing the question away. "You are like Simon and Julia, and the rest of them. You have all lived too long in Sir Hilary's shadow. Do you imagine that such a man is above the law?"

"Yes," said she simply. "If the law must go by witnesses, for he is above those. He can force them to anything he pleases, since they depend on him; as you have forced me."

"Folly," said he, contemptuously, "a man without ten guineas of his own in his pocket!"

"I wish you would not set yourself up against him. You do not know this place or these people."

"I have heard that parrot cry often enough," said he roughly. "These people! What do you know of them, driving about with your aunt, giving them sermons and soups? I have lived in London, and seen more people in a day than you in a year. I have talked with lords, and I have held Ned Ludd's men at the point of a pistol, that were for wrecking one of my mills. These people! They are Englishmen, and know what's good for them, when they have been told often enough what it is; honest plain idiots, like the rest of their countrymen. I am not afraid of them, nor of my own judgment. You are not the only one fooled. Simon is as bad."

"Have you spoken to him?" she asked, with some eagerness.

"Not yet," Forster answered, "but I have no doubt of him, if we can keep Julia out of the way."

"Thrope is a Pomfret living," said Melian, warning him. "It goes with Mawdry."

"Yes," said he, "that is true. But how does Mawdry go? To whom?"

Then, running quickly on:

"Besides, Sir Hilary could not turn him out if he wished. To oppose a patron on a point of law is not immoral; the bishop will not be down on Simon for that. And he is not irrational, though he is timid. I shall find arguments to touch Simon, easily enough."

She could say nothing more, after speaking her warning. Forster, having said his say, began to pace up and down the room, hands behind him as was his habit, the fingers of the right closed about the wrist of the left. After some few minutes, no word having been said, he halted near her once more, and caught her curl again, but this time gently; and said, looking down on her:

"Do not still be sullen. Will you not be friends?"

"What do you care," she answered, suddenly bitter, "whether we are friends or not?"

"This much," said he, frankly, "that there is nothing so damned uncomfortable for a man as to be shut up in a house with a sulky woman."

Disarmed, she gave a little unwilling laugh. He put up both arms, crooking and stretching them.

"Simon to-morrow," said he, "this game is enjoyable. And now, I think I will have a bottle to our success."

He pulled his keys from his pocket and went out, calling loudly for Walter to bring a light for the cellar.

His daughter, left alone, had food for her thoughts. Putting together the fragments she had heard that day

with other hints that had slipped from him, she began to see her father's project take shape as a whole; it was, simply, to become his enemy's chief creditor, and so bring Sir Hilary down. The matter of Frank was a detail; ill-will would be gratified to see Sir Hilary's would-be murderer walking about free, and the trial would provide a first test of strength. She did not understand the means whereby debts could be transferred; but that they could be transferred and used as a weapon, was certain. Her father's persistence in this project showed very fully the tormenting power of his passion for Mrs. Dest. Whether that passion was still of love, or if time and much brooding had changed it to hatred, she could not be sure. It was alive, however; the power that would save Frank, and ruin Sir Hilary, and possess Mawdry in the end, came from that dark-haired woman with subtle, useless hands, who, while the blood flowed from her lip, kept contempt for him in her eyes.

Her father's design upon Mawdry she regretted. Would they live, if he succeeded, in that great house, unvisited, disapproved? For Sir Hilary's folly would not justify his successor's intrusion into the county circle. This was not London, where money counted, where the depth of a flounce made all the difference. She sighed for London. Since they had lived at the Toll House, Melian and her father had changed ambitions. He had longed for a window upon some busy street, and now was, not content indeed, but settled in his purpose to remain; while she, who had been almost content, now was sick of the challenges and enmities that she foresaw, and longed to be hidden in the enormous indifference of London. True, she supposed that obscurity could not long cover her forty thousand

pounds; but the offers of fortune-hunters need not be accepted, and the refusal of them, at least, would be in her power. Here, nothing was in her power, save only such occupations as had long lost their charm, the fleecing of wool work sheep, the re-reading of poets whose despairs and sublimities, being known by heart, could no longer console. She feared her father. She dreaded giving her evidence, but did not dare refuse him, and could find no motive in the tangle of right and wrong that would let her defy him. She hoped almost that her evidence would not be believed; failure in the lesser plan might check him in the greater, and failure might come from many quarters. Her uncle Simon would surely not be bullied into acquiescence in perjury. Mrs. Goard was reliably bitter. And there was Sir Hilary's word to come, that must weigh more heavily with a jury at Pliny than all the oaths of a world outside.

Melian, putting away her netting tidily, as she had been taught, was too much of a coward to make any resolve that should further defiance, but she promised herself to attend to it most punctually in her prayers.

It was ten o'clock. Rousing, she rang her bell to warn the servants, and busy with her thoughts went, with a spiritless step, upstairs.

IX

She was waked from sleep at some unknown hour by heavy, dragging steps and groaning on the stairs. Frightened, she lit her candle, opened her door a little and looked out, holding the candlestick high. Nothing was to be seen, until she advanced to the well of the staircase; but there the faint descending beam showed

her a man's figure, fallen and huddled, on the steps halfway down. It was her father, she knew. Catching her bed-gown about her, dreading to find him hurt, she went towards him. As she approached, words came slobbering out of his mouth, sometimes pronounced with painful slowness, at others tumbling together helter-skelter.

"I'll get him," said the voice, "I'll get—get the—get the——" Then a rabble of words that sounded vile. "But we'll see about that. Yes. We'll see—I'll get him, and his bloody judges, and his house. Buy him up, buy him out. Money! That's not it. Mawdry, I said. Mawdry. I'll do it, I say—I say before Christ."

Melian came near, bent over him; as she leaned, she caught a gust of his breath, nauseous, sweet with wine, and recoiled. He opened his eyes. Seeing her standing with her dark hair about her shoulders, he blinked, and after a moment stretched out his hands.

"Laura!" said he piteously. "Laura, come here to me, don't leave me, don't leave me again——"

She turned at that and ran back up the stairs. The candle-flame, carelessly tilted, blew back upon her hair. She crushed out the burning lock with one hand against her bosom, and reaching the top of the flight, paused to look down. But Forster did not pursue. After he had clawed himself up a step or two he forgot her, lost her among other crowding phantoms, and sank back bubbling, his head drooping sideways. She ran to her room, locked the door, set a heavy chair against it; and for the rest of the night did not sleep.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THROPE

I

NEXT day Melian, dropping asleep two hours after the coming of the light, woke to her father's voice calling outside the door.

"Melian! Melian, will you come to Thrope? I must talk to your uncle. Will you come or not?"

Drowsily, to quiet him, she answered that she would come.

"Be ready, then, in an hour. Don't keep the horses standing."

And he went away with a brisk step, whistling. Melian lay, her senses wearily returning, wondering at him, that he could after last night wish for her company; and at herself for agreeing to his plan. As she dressed she rehearsed their meeting uncomfortably; but when she came downstairs he met her in the hall with a smile, showing no trace, save a slight fullness under his eyes, of the night's debauch; which, if he recollected it at all, he seemed to take for granted. For this behaviour, though her moral sense deplored it, her cowardly heart was grateful. Any apology, any reference would have been intolerable. Had he shown any shame, she must have felt awkwardness; but she was spared by his deliberate ignoring, or perhaps sheer forgetfulness, of the incident upon the stairs. As she climbed up to sit beside him in the tall curricie, she blessed, with a shud-

der, the strangely insensible minds of men, so healthily inured to indelicacy.

During the drive, despite his evident high spirits, he spoke very little. He made sounds to the horses, and called out a good-day to some hedgers at the roadside; for the rest of the time he sat whistling softly and making occasional flicks and passes in the air with his slender whip. But as they turned in at the Rectory's familiar gate, he said to his daughter:

"I hope your yesterday's lesson is not lost."

She murmured something, unable at first to understand him, her mind being full of the scene on the stairs. He continued, seeing her trouble:

"Your evidence, I mean. Scatchard's catechism. Have you got it by heart?"

"I think I have."

"You had better be present while I talk to your uncle. But you are not to speak, do you understand? unless I require it. Do not interfere; but if I need you to support me, see that you do it."

With that they were at the door; and a boy, Frank's substitute, having led away the horses, they entered and were greeted by a Mrs. Montfort hospitable yet surprised, who swept forward with hand outstretched and a disapproving eye.

"Horatio," said she, "your impetuosity will one day be your undoing. I am always glad to receive a visit from you, but I prefer to prepare for it."

"Yes," said he blandly. "I know you do, and I cannot think why. I have never yet caught you unawares, either you or your house. There is never a hair out of place on the one, not a reel of cotton in the other."

Mrs. Montfort narrowly eyed him. She was ac-

customed, in her meetings with her brother, to do like a warship spying an enemy pennant: to sail up as soon as she could and exchange a broadside, drawing off, after an hour or two, with loss or honour as the case might be. This unexpected flag of truce disconcerted her.

"Where is Simon?" Forster went on. "I am here particularly to consult him."

"You, consulting Simon? In what capacity, may I ask?"

"As a clergyman," her brother rejoined, with a steady mouth and eye, "on a question of conduct."

Mrs. Montfort gave way a step or two at these words; looked from her brother to Melian; and at last said bluntly, forsaking all rotundity of phrase:

"I refuse to believe you."

Forster burst out laughing and hauled down the unfamiliar flag.

"Well, well," said he, "I laid it on too thickly, perhaps. But I need to see Simon, for all that. Where is he?"

"Composing his sermon," she replied, "and has particularly requested that he may not be disturbed until the dinner-hour."

"Has he had his summons for this Danbury matter?"

"Pray do not distract him by referring to it. As I have said, he is at work upon his sermon——"

"Then he will be glad to escape for a while. Good God! do you think I was not often sick of reckoning up discounts, so that I would clap the clerk on the shoulder that came in to tell me a chimney was on fire?"

"You are profane."

"I am right, and I bet you ten guineas. Ten guineas to a paper spill he is not at his sermon at all——"

And before Mrs. Montfort could extend a hand or a trumpeting sentence to stop him, he was through the baize door, Melian at his heels, and had flung open the door of the study. There by the fire stood the Rector, who, in fright at their entrance, turned hastily round, revealing his thin cheeks bulged with a great bite of cake from the slice he held in his right hand. After the first motionless astonished pause they saw him duck his head to swallow. Down went the morsel, while the main slice, vanishing into a tail-pocket, left his hand empty to be extended in greeting. It was done in a moment, unseen by Mrs. Montfort; but Forster would not let it pass.

"Now, Julia," he scoffed, "you did wisely not to take my bet. Will you admit for once that a black coat and the old Adam's fig-leaf may go very well together?"

Mrs. Montfort, now arrived in the door, could understand nothing of what he intended; her husband hastened to speak, lest she should be enlightened.

"I am glad to see you both," said he, "very glad. Melian, my dear, your eyes are heavy. You have responsibilities now——"

"Give us a chair apiece, Simon," Forster commanded. "I want to speak with you about this summons."

"Yes, yes," Mr. Montfort assented, his smile fading. "Very perplexing. Very awkward. I really do not know what to do."

"I have told you many times," his wife interposed, "that you must support Sir Hilary. It is inconceivable that you should not do so."

"Pray, let me talk to Horatio, Julia," Mr. Montfort irritably requested. "You are a woman of commanding intellect, to be sure; but these legal questions have not come your way. Sir Hilary, you see, Horatio—but then, Frank was a good servant. This boy is useless, he thinks nothing of lashing poor Pompey to a gallop. What am I to do, what am I to say, Horatio?"

"You will give your evidence truthfully, I imagine."

"Certainly, I shall not depart from the truth in any particular; but there are one or two matters of which I am not sure. Shall I be justified, think you, in omitting these?"

"It is the whole truth that you swear to tell," replied Forster, "and nothing but the truth. You must not ask me how to talk to your own conscience."

"Exactly," said Mrs. Montfort, sitting down and drawing from her bag a hank of wool, "the whole truth. I cannot understand, Simon, your tenderness towards this ruffian."

She indicated with a gesture that Melian should extend her hands; and putting the wool upon these, she began to wind at a great rate. Melian submitted, with an eye upon her father, not to miss her cue. Mr. Montfort frowned at his wife's last word, and said with some firmness:

"As I have already told you, Julia, you do wrong to make use of such expressions. Whatever the lawyers may ask me, I intend to give Frank a character for good conduct——"

"What?" cried Mrs. Montfort, outraged, stopping her swift hands in mid-air. "After the hideous story that Melian confided——?"

"I know nothing of that," replied Mr. Montfort

doggedly. "The girl may be lying. I have always found Frank diligent and attentive; he is careful never to drive too rashly or too fast. It is a shocking thing that he should be accused; and I believe that if it were known how steady a man he is, the charge would be withdrawn."

"That," said his wife, with decision, "would show a truckling spirit to which I believe no English judge would condescend."

"Come," said Forster, "this is very well, Simon. I am glad to see you stand up for Frank so stoutly. I am interested, since Melian is subpoenaed, too; and from what she tells me, I believe he did not do it. If you both make a stand we may get him off."

"I am uneasy," Mr. Montfort went on, brushing some crumbs from his cuff with a quick and secret movement, "uneasy. The whole truth! I will not conceal from you, Horatio, that if the whole truth must be told, there are one or two facts that may tell against Frank."

"Eh?" said Forster, staring, "Do you mean to say he was there? What had he to gain by stone-throwing?"

"I have asked myself that," Mr. Montfort replied. "I cannot find an answer."

"Did you see him?" Forster persisted.

Mr. Montfort hesitated.

"They were some distance away. I cannot be sure——"

"You think you saw him?" Forster pressed on.

Mr. Montfort suddenly made a gesture of impatience and distress.

"I do not know what I saw. I do not know if, by constantly thinking, turning the event over in my mind, I may not have come to imagine——"

"Not what you imagine, but what you will swear to is the question," said Forster bluntly. "Will you swear that he was with the mob?"

"I cannot be sure. I may have been deceived——"

"Will you swear that he was not with them?"

"I cannot do that. I may have—it is possible that I did see him."

Forster sat back, hands in pockets, underlip jutting.

"If this is how you answer," said he, "they will make you look a pretty fool in court."

"And then," went on Mr. Montfort, "you know, he was not with the carriage when we returned to it. Pompey was left alone—eating grass, quite unattended. I had to go to the farmhouse. I got exceedingly wet. From the time we left the carriage till they brought Sir Hilary to it, I saw nothing of Frank. A matter of two hours and more."

Forster's expression announced that here was something he had not expected. Mr. Montfort continued, with a pleading look:

"I have known Frank Halfpenny seven years, since he came here as a boy, half grown. During the whole of that time he has been a faithful and diligent servant. So far I can answer for him."

"It is no use answering for seven years," said Forster, "if you cannot answer for two hours, he is lost."

"No, no, Horatio. I will not believe it."

"Make up your mind to it. It is true."

"What will they do to him?"

"I think there can be no doubt. It is a bare ten years since the risings in Yorkshire and Northampton. They do not want such things in this county. Frank will hang."

There was a silence, broken by Mrs. Montfort's sturdy assent:

"And rightly," said she, "insubordinate villain!"

"Julia!" her husband cried, his hands at his ears. "You do not think what you say. This is a man who has served us, whom we have spoken with daily; we have trusted our lives in his hands——"

Forster, for all his gloom, could not here forbear a smile at a recollection of Pompey's sedate paces; which observing:

"Do not sneer," continued Mr. Montfort, "I see you smile. I do not see how this cruel dilemma can afford you amusement."

Mrs. Montfort, rolling the last of her wool, took occasion to point a moral.

"This expedition to Danbury was, as I well recollect saying at the time, sacrilegious; you have now abundant proof that it was ill-judged as well. In future, perhaps, you will leave such investigation—the violations of tombs and I do not know what else—to be prosecuted by laymen, to whom these practices are more suited."

"Sacrilegious!" Mr. Montfort repeated. "Tombs! We did not get so far as that. We did not ascertain the nature of the tumulus before we were disturbed. Disappointing, indeed!"

"Richly deserved," said Mrs. Montfort firmly, with an emphatic forward bend of the head.

"You side with the attackers, do you?" Forster asked her. "You think they did right to stone these inquisitive gentlemen away?"

"Two wrongs," said she, "do not make a right. Simon did wrong to attend this gathering; Frank, to disperse it."

"Well, he will suffer for that," said her brother reassuringly, "you may be certain. As for Simon, I think he suffers, too."

"I do, I do, indeed," Mr. Montfort confirmed him, striking his brow. "Since that paper came, I dream at night, and wake in fear, thinking I see the black cap, and Frank's face as he listens. But I must tell the truth."

He put his hand over his eyes; then abruptly pulled out his handkerchief to wipe his forehead. The slice of cake was jerked from his pocket and fell to the floor, but so great was his trouble that he hardly regarded it. Dabbing at his face with the handkerchief, which left crumbs upon his eyebrows, he sat down forlornly, his gaze upon the floor.

"It is right that I should give justice the facts," he went on, "but I am uneasy. I cannot sleep or eat. Frequently I am angry with Julia. I reproach myself, but what can I do? If it were not unworthy, I could almost wish to find myself ill, to have done with the need to appear."

Melian saw a strange slow smile dawn in her father's eyes, the smile of a man who sees his way open to a thing he desires. He spoke slowly, too, as though behind the words some thoughts were maturing.

"Well," he asked, "and why not?"

"Because I am not ill," returned Mr. Montfort, querulously. "I am in good health," reluctantly—"I thank God."

"You are unlike yourself," Forster insisted, "you are pale, unwholesome-looking. Do you not see it, Julia?"

"If so," she replied, with asperity, "it is in part his own fault."

And she picked up the morsel of cake, pursing her mouth as she put it into the paper-basket.

"Melian," Forster appealed to his daughter, "does not your uncle look a sick man? Of course he does; no doubt about it. Simon, you feel feverish, I think?"

"Feverish?" said Mr. Montfort doubtfully, pressing one chill hand upon the other. "The reverse rather. As though I were about to have an ague."

"Ague will do," said Forster cheerfully, "better still, something infectious, if you can contrive it."

With a swift movement he seated himself at the writing-table, and began, one finger pointing in emphasis, to explain:

"The first thing is, you must give your evidence. You are summoned, there is no getting out of it. But evidence may be given in two ways. By word of mouth, as is usual; or by a declaration, made and attested in the presence of a magistrate. This may be done when, for any reason, a witness is unable to attend the court."

"But I am able," said Mr. Montfort, yet with a gleam of hope.

"Bodily, perhaps, you are able; but do you say that you can go to the box and speak clearly of what you know, and put your case fairly? Why, here even, in your own study, you are all at sea; you are sweating like a horse that has done a dozen miles at a gallop. What will it be in court, with questions coming at you from all sides, and a great top-heavy judge sawing at your mouth to bring you round to where he needs you? I have had my fill of lawyers, and know something of their procedure. Believe me, you can never come through it with credit."

"What must I do then?" asked Mr. Montfort, like a child. "I will be guided."

Forster took a little time to answer; then with an air of serious counsel said:

"It is clear that to give evidence fairly, body and mind must both be equal to their task. Your body, you say, though I do not agree, is in good case. Your mind is not. In fairness to yourself, and Frank, and the justices, too—for it will save their time not to have you stammering and contradicting in person—I advise this course, which seems to me the wisest. Write what you have to say, sign, and get it witnessed. It may be done before me; I am a magistrate for the county of Northampton; and I will see that it comes to the proper quarter."

Mr. Montfort, fingering his lips, seemed to consider the plan. In the unbending of his brow might be seen present relief and imminent yielding. But from long habit his eye wandered to his wife, who had been listening closely; and not until she nodded permission did he answer.

"Very true. I am in no fit condition—we must think, as you say, of the justice's time. And then Frank, poor Frank. I fear my testimony, given by word of mouth, might be of no great value. I might forget, in my alarm, or wrongly remember. Yes, you are right. This is the best thing to do, to write it down coolly, having my wits about me. I think that by the end of a week or so I might very well manage——"

"A week! We cannot wait so long. Come, tell the story, and I'll write it. Here we have Julia and Melian, competent witnesses. Here's paper all ready"—taking

a pile that lay ready for the sermon—"wait awhile until I state the preamble."

He took up a pen and rapidly wrote the formula, murmuring it aloud.

"I, the undersigned, being at present under summons to appear and give evidence before the King's Justices at an Assize held in the town of Pliny Abbots, in the county of Comptonshire——" The strong thick writing had darkened a third of the page before he looked up and read over the last words.

"—and do hereby declare before God and in the presence of witnesses the same to be true. Now, Simon, where do we begin?"

A servant entered, and with much stooping and whispering called Mrs. Montfort away, presumably to conjure food for the unexpected guests. Melian, her task finished, sat quietly listening to the scene. No cue for her had yet been spoken. Her father had not looked her way. She watched, but could not read him. Did he hope to oblige her uncle to lie? Her uncle had a great idea of truth, combined with a great respect for the law, and despite the vague speech which in self-defence he assumed, possessed a memory remarkably tenacious and sure. The story her uncle would tell was not the story she had so painfully learned, and must at many points disprove it. Yet her father made no sign.

"As nearly as I can recollect," Mr. Montfort was beginning, with great precision, "Melian and I on the day of the assault at Danbury quitted the carriage at ten minutes past three to ascend the hill. We left Frank with the horse, loosening some strap or other—I am uncertain of its name——"

"Omit the strap," said his brother-in-law, writing, "it is of little importance. This was the last time, before the assault, that you saw Frank?"

"It was."

Forster wrote.

"The assault was at what hour?"

"Later, much later. Nearer four o'clock. I was standing with Mr. Finn, Mr. Sabin, the surgeon, Mr. Holroyd, and Admiral Tarbuck, looking into the trench and discussing the stones which had been cast up. Suddenly the French gentleman who was with Sir Hilary directed his attention to the advancing mob. I was, for the moment, somewhat confused. I did not appreciate the immediate value of ascertaining the exact time. However, I think I may say that the hour was four."

Forster wrote.

"And then you saw the mob coming up that hill. Was Frank among them?"

"Pardon me, I cannot swear to that. I saw the mob—a very curious and terrifying sight, with their faces blacked and their weapons shining. The old phrase took on a new meaning for me: 'Terrible as an army with banners.'"

"But as to Frank; I am to write, am I, that you did not see him among them?"

"Write nothing yet. Wait awhile—I must consider what is the exact truth."

Mr. Montfort pondered. Forster waited. Melian watched them both. At last:

"Write," said Mr. Montfort, "this, Horatio. That I saw among the misguided men one who was differently dressed, and whose face was not darkened with charcoal. I do not say that it was Frank. Some stranger, I

have no doubt. But he seemed to wear a dark coat and breeches, and might have been mistaken for Frank."

Forster wrote, breaking off in the middle of a sentence to take fresh paper.

"Yes. What next? Did you see the stone-throwing?"

"No, no," exclaimed Mr. Montfort, glad to be able to disclaim any part in this incident. "Sir Hilary, with great courtesy, at once thought of Melian, and bade me escort her. We went down the west side of the hill, hearing shouts; but we quickened our pace at that. I did not look round."

"How long did it take to reach the carriage?"

"Twenty minutes' fast walking; the last hundred yards or so in heavy rain. The carriage was where we had left it, the horse had remained quietly cropping grass. I recollect that clearly."

"And Frank?"

"Frank was not there," said Mr. Montfort, drooping. "I fear I must swear to that. He was not there, for I went up to the farmhouse to look for him."

Imperturbably Forster wrote on while Mr. Montfort walked about, questioning the furniture, the view from the window, the carpet, with troubled eyes.

"And when you got there?"

"I was horrified. It was, you see, the first I knew of the assault. Imagine the scene—Sir Hilary bleeding upon a table, remedies being tried—all was in an uproar."

"Did you speak—tell anyone Frank was lost?"

"Later; when the suggestion was made that my carriage should take Sir Hilary to Mawdry. But I do not know that anyone paid me much attention. The surgeon and two other gentlemen carried Sir Hilary

to the carriage; and there, to my surprise, was Frank upon his box."

"—'and there,'" Forster repeated, taking a fresh sheet, "'was Frank upon his box.' Yes; then did you question him, where he had been?"

"Sir Hilary's injury—so distressing—the general anxiety—no, I did not question him. I was too much relieved to find him there. I said nothing, therefore, at the time."

"Nor later?"

"No——" He looked nervously towards where his wife had been sitting. "I do not know what Julia may have done, however."

"I am not taking Julia's deposition," said Forster dryly. "Let me be sure of this. You did not, while at the farmhouse, tell anyone that Frank could not be found?"

"I spoke of it to Mr. Finn; but he did not reply, and I am very sure he did not hear."

"To no one else?"

"No."

"That will do," said Forster, stretching out his cramped hand in a gesture of relief, "now I have it all."

"Wait," Mr. Montfort eagerly bade him, "there is my testimony to his character."

Forster, without protest, took up his pen again. There were no more than a dozen words at the top of the sheet, and he took a new paragraph.

"Write this," said Mr. Montfort, "if you will be so kind. 'The accused man, Francis Halfpenny, has been in my service for seven years. I have found him an honest, sober Christian, orderly in behaviour and conversation'" —he cast a defiant glance at his wife's

vacant chair—"and I am grieved and shocked at the very accusation——"

"What is that to the judges?" Forster asked, mocking. "They are not trying you. Keep to the point."

"Very well, very well," said Mr. Montfort pettishly, "strike it out. But let us end upon a creditable sentence. Hum! Let me see." He walked about a little, and returning to the table, in his sermon voice de-claimed:

"In offering this evidence, I perform an extremely painful duty, but one which every subject owes to his King; with tenderness and attention, certainly to the prisoner's interests, but with manfulness as regards the public; upon whom in the persons of the jury, the responsibility of weighing it must fall.' I think," said Mr. Montfort, reading over Forster's shoulder as, word by word, it went down, "I think that will do."

Mrs. Montfort loomed in the doorway with tidings of an attendant meal.

"You are in time, Julia," her brother welcomed her. "Come and sign."

"I must read the whole through first," Mr. Montfort interposed.

Melian looked for some objection on her father's part; but he handed over the written sheets without hesitation. She watched her uncle's face as he read, and paragraph by paragraph approved. He took up the pen once or twice to put a comma or to underline a word, but changed nothing; and at last, with something of a flourish, set his signature upon the third page, followed by his University degrees. Forster summoned his sister, with a gesture, to do the same, and a firm, slender "Julia

Maria Montfort" appeared upon the page. Melian came last, and her father smiled, offering her the pen.

"This concerns you most," said he, "for you will have to corroborate it. Have you listened attentively?"

"Yes," she answered, wondering.

"Sign, then," said he, with no further explanation or reference to Mr. Scatchard's catechism. She obeyed, but was altogether at a loss to understand him. Her uncle's voice broke in upon the tension between them.

"That child! Surely they will not bring her into court to be questioned? It cannot be necessary. She is a woman, and a minor. She cannot appreciate fully the nature of an oath——"

"I don't know about that," Forster answered, grinning, "since she left you she has had the opportunity of learning."

Mrs. Montfort, hands ominously clasped at her waist, rebuked them both.

"Melian," said she, "will show by her replies that her upbringing has been decorous; and by her demeanour in court that she knows her place to be the home. The meal has long been served. Kindly, all come in."

But Mr. Montfort hesitated still, the papers in his hands.

"You are sure, Horatio, that this affidavit is legal? That I am in no sense shirking my duty by not making these statements in person?"

"I will answer for that. Do not plague yourself with scruples. I tell you, I am a magistrate, and have had, myself, to administer the law. It is legal; and the best thing you can do."

With a sigh Mr. Montfort held out the folded sheets.

II

The drive home from Thrope was as silent as the morning journey, but less gay. Shadows slanted differently in the evening sun, and there was a thinning and chilling of the air that, with the dappled foliage, yellow patches upon green, proved the month to be October. The whitened hedges ran past their wheels; beyond the fields shadows had begun to reveal dips and shallows in the hills that looked smooth under an overhead sun. Drummer, the horse, stepped out willingly, throwing his fore-legs up in classical trotting style. His hoofs on the road and the broken evening calling of birds were the only sounds.

Melian sat with her cloak gathered about her, the rug holding closely her knees and her father's. She held her shoulders high, bent forward against the swift air. He drove without flourishes, sitting very upright, his lips set in a smile. They shared the warmth of the rug, and save for that, were utterly apart. Fear was beginning to descend upon Melian's mind; questions assailed it from all sides like arrows. Her uncle's evidence, so carefully written down, read over, and witnessed, killed that which she had been taught as a lesson; and her father made no protest. Was there other hope for Frank, then, which he knew, and was concealing? Wretchedly twisting in her orderly web of lies, she had an impulse to break through it, refuse to speak; but the impulse went by. She knew that although she might plan disobedience, it would come to nothing in performance. A heroine would have starved, and made fine speeches into the bargain, rather than yield her conscience; but a heroine, she thought, is usually in very different case.

She, Melian, might be capable of heroism if her defiance could be resounding enough, and the consequences be taken before an applauding crowd. But in some hour of every-day life to go to her father, and there say, alone with him, "I will not": to suffer she knew not what manifestation of his displeasure—not dungeons, certainly, but some unknown humiliation of the spirit; this she could not face. She feared him, his impulsiveness, the childish destructive plans to which a man's strength was brought; his drunkenness; his cold eyes which hid passions and a living desire. She had heard stories of brave women in the Spanish towns that resisted the French; for an hour, driving home through the evening, she envied them, and would gladly have exchanged their alarms and musket-bruised shoulders for her own silent nights, and the civil agonies of a woman within the shelter of her father's house.

CHAPTER NINE

PLINY ABBOTS

I

DURING the Assizes the town of Pliny Abbots woke to uneasy life. It was, in the ordinary way, a town without passions, which drowsed and grumbled through the seasons, having its own calendar whose red-letter days were not those of the great world. Time passed over Pliny with the footfall of a man returning late to a sleeping house. The years went by, bringing children to birth and old men to their graves; but these events showed in themselves so little variety that they hardly served to distinguish the years. Only one week out of the fifty-two brought change and stir and new faces to Pliny: that week when the Misses Oldridge moved out of the Judge's Lodging, which they held at a cheap rent in consideration of this annual upheaval; when young lawyers took possession of the Lion and Circlet, and nightly wrangled over cards and drank themselves silly, referring to each other deferentially as "learned brother" by day; and when local men stood a chance of providing holiday entertainment for their fellow-citizens by means of a hanging.

The trial of nine men on a capital charge took up two full sittings of the Court of Assize; that is to say, the actual hearing of the cause took so long. There were delays, however, before proceedings could begin, such, for example, as that caused by the choosing of the jury, where each name, as it was put forward, was ob-

jected to by the prisoner's counsel, on the ground that being Sir Hilary's tenant, or butcher, or saddler, the bearer of it could not be impartial. Not understanding, however, this complaint, and imagining that the rejection of their services reflected upon their honesty and good name, besides depriving them of front seats for the trial, the jurymen who had been dismissed made no secret of their dissatisfaction; while their supporters, to the number of forty or fifty, assembled outside the doors of the court, morning and evening, where they vented their disapproval with a steady booing. This procedure they varied with cheers for Sir Hilary so loud as to prove very plainly that Mr. Tooke's doubt of their impartiality had been well founded.

This gathering, and the noise it made, was unusual for Pliny, but there were other sights stranger still, and of greater interest to the citizens; such as the vehicles of the county grandees, in which great ladies could be seen nodding and laughing, and well rouged up, even by daylight. Some of these had bespoke rooms at the Lion and Circlet; which, with handsome women sweeping in and out, and gentlemen bending to save their tall hats from contact with its low archway as they drove into the yard, might have been some halting-place of note on the road to Bath.

Horatio Forster stopped at the inn in order to bespeak some kind of meal when the day's sitting should be ended. While she waited for him to conclude this business, Melian heard bets laid upon the results of the trial; in the yard of the Lion and Circlet such exchanges as the following were taking place:

"Who'll take fifteen on the red-headed man in the belcher?"

"Nobody here is fool enough, I hope. Why, he's certain for hanging; I never saw a man more likely to catch a judge's eye."

"But as an outsider—a sporting chance—and then, look at the odds! I'll lay fours——"

"I haven't any money to waste. No, but the neat fellow, the groom, he's my fancy. I'll lay anything up to fifty, even money, that he gets off."

"But that's the fellow that's charged with assaulting Pomfret! He's sure for the gallows, might have been born with a rope round his neck."

And the speaker began to sing:

"In a box of a stone jug I was born,
Of a hempen widow all forlorn,
And my old dad, as I've heard say,
Was a famous merchant in capers gay,
Nix my dolly, pals, fake away!"

"Be quiet," said the other, lightly cuffing his mouth.
"That girl there——"

Melian saw the two men, after a glance at her, put their heads together, and she made shift to meet their curious eyes with a kind of smooth defensive indifference such as might serve her in court, when the time came. For the past week, no action of hers, and no thought had passed, without the weight of the ordeal upon it. A ticking clock, a wooden bench, a sudden question, all were so many reminders. She slept badly, and, waking, was cheated of the momentary sense of well-being that comes with returning life, for the ordeal waited by her pillow, and with the first flicker of eyelids was upon her. No action was natural; it was performed with the underknowledge that so she must speak, so must look,

while strangers questioned her and strangers looked down. She had studied her replies, and had them by heart. Often she spoke them aloud before the glass in her room; and even then, with only her own image watching, dryness would come upon her throat, it would close in the middle of a word, and she must wait, staring into her own frightened eyes, until she could swallow again, and go on with her repetition. Day and night she practised indifference, arguing with herself, imploring herself to be reasonable, saying that it was nothing, that it was to save a man's life, that it would soon be over; and always her heart gave her the lie. It would begin to thud for no reason, in the midst of a sentence, in the depths of sleep.

These men's eyes upon her, their whispers, she told herself, were only a foretaste; she schooled herself to sit still, looking between the ears of the horse, while they talked and glanced; until, at last, gratefully, she saw her father coming. An ostler was with him, and he put up a hand to help Melian descend.

"Get down," he commanded, "we'll leave the horse here. Can you walk a hundred yards?"

She obeyed. He gave an order to the man, then, turning, offered his daughter an arm. As she took it, he stood a little away from her, closely considering her appearance.

"How do you feel?" he asked; and taking the trembling of her hand upon his sleeve for answer: "You have got yourself into a nice state already. Where is the use? I tell you, you will not be called till to-morrow. Take your pleasure while you can."

"Pleasure," she repeated; and could say no more.

"Come now," said he, beginning to walk briskly,

“you are not going to be hanged. You are for the box, not the bar. A trial is a fine sight, I can tell you, and one that most girls of your age would give their ears to be at. I remember, I was at the Guildhall once when they tried that fellow Eaton for blasphemy——” And he talked on until they came to the door of the court. She perceived that he was trying, in his own way, to comfort her and distract her mind; but though she seemed to heed him, and asked one or two questions, it was in a voice that she hardly knew. They entered, and were struggling upstairs. There was pressure of human limbs upon her shoulders, upon her sides, a man’s breath was warm at her ear, knees and elbows took her sharply with each step. The jostling was fierce; she could see her father’s hand guarding his fob; and a woman near her, who made a false step, could not stumble back or forward, being held by the pressure, but sank down; and Melian heard her cry out as the man behind her, involuntarily borne upwards and trying to avoid trampling her body, set his heel upon her hand. At one time the drive of the crowd sent her three steps higher than her father and dragged her hand from his arm; when she stood still, trying to regain him, a man cursed her, then laughed, and thrusting her down and aside with his elbow, took her place. She was frightened and stifled, but the bodily fear and stress drove preoccupation from her mind; and though her father looked at her doubtfully, she had never felt less like fainting in her life. She was at the turn of the stairs, and could see an opening, a narrow door, towards which the stream of bodies flowed and must bear her. There was a heave and a scramble; her father, butting with his shoulders, was at her side. They reached the door together, went

through it, and down a final step or two. The unbelievable was upon her. She was in court.

II

The judges, it seemed, were not yet come; but their clerks were already active, and so were the ushers, who walked with a slight backward tilt, as though they leant upon some invisible support. The counsel for both parties were present; their gowns hung with a majesty contradicted by their wigs, ill-fitting, and for the most part too small. Indeed, the whole well of the court was crowded with men of law. The balconies above, which ran round three sides of the square, were given over to the crowd; while on the fourth side was reared the judges' three-decker throne, something like a Punch and Judy booth grown awful; dark red, with the Lion and Unicorn posturing upon it, and openings in it like little stages; the topmost for the judges, the next for their clerks, already bending low and sideways to their foolscap; and below these, a third, inhabited by functionaries whose duty seemed limited to glaring upon the balconies to keep them in order, and jingling the money in their pockets.

In one corner of the well of the court the prisoners were already penned, like sheep within hurdles. The number of them being the greatest that had ever been tried here at one time, the ordinary bar had given place to a high wooden railing, topped with iron spikes pointing inwards, that came above the heads of the prisoners while they sat, and to their chins when they stood to plead to their indictment. Melian sought along the line of faces for Frank. She saw him soon, neat in his dress as ever, fresh shaven, and wearing a clean neckcloth. He

sat with folded arms, and upon his face was a look of resignation, as though through much rebellion he had come, exhausted, to calm. Next him was a red-haired man, who kept quickly darting and turning his head in a ferrety way; he had that creature's reddish eyes. In the course of his twisting glances his face presented itself sideways, and she saw then, by the line of the nose and brow, so like Alice, that this was her half-brother, Isaac Goard. The other men seemed simple country fellows, herdsmen and ploughboys. They sat still, now and then shuffling with their feet; and looked at the fine robes, the red throne, and the hurrying quill-pens with a simplicity that forgot danger in the present enjoyment of the finest show, though it were the last, that they were ever to see in their lives.

There was a stir, and some stentorian announcement. The judges were coming; amid a rustle and quickening of the whole court they appeared and took their places on the crimson cushions. Sir Christopher Barstow, Knight, Baron of the Exchequer, and the Honourable Sir Vauncey Lassiter, one of the justices of the Court of King's Bench, were their titles and styles; magnificent, both of them, in red and white, with the heavy regular locks of the wig falling to their shoulders. They sat. The balconies were quieted by much roaring from the ushers; and obedient to an order, the prisoners stood. Mr. Topping, junior counsel for the Crown, flung back his gown and opened the indictment with a commanding "hem!"

"The jurors for our Lord the King, upon their oath here present; that before and at the time of committing the offences hereinafter mentioned, to wit, on the twenty-fourth day of June, in the fifty-sixth year of

our sovereign Lord George III, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, King, Defender of the Faith; at the place known as Danbury, within the County of Comptonshire, divers evil-disposed persons to the number of twenty-five or more, whose names to the jurors aforesaid are yet unknown, save for those who are here apprehended; being husbandmen and labourers; did unjustly and unlawfully combine, conspire, consent, and agree among themselves, and gather themselves together unlawfully, riotously, routously, and tumultuously, to the great breach and disturbance of the peace of our said Lord, the King."

This, with a good deal more phrasing to the same effect, made up the first count. The second dealt chiefly with the crime of disguising, in which were included coats worn inside out, and the blackening of faces "with charcoal or by other means"—the indictment was cautious. Count three was much longer, and took a full ten minutes to state. It related the dispersing in a violent and illicit manner of a number of gentlemen harmlessly employed upon a lawful occasion. Sir Hilary's hat came into it, under the description of "property, goods, and chattels maliciously injured." The stone-throwing itself figured as "felonious assault, with intent to murder and kill"; the whole being, as before, to the great breach and disturbance of the peace of our Lord the King, his crown and dignity.

The indictment read, Mr. Topping, with a concluding "hem," sat down, and for the rest of the trial was lost to view. It was Mr. Serjeant Cockell who rose to prosecute, very formal and grave, with a grand red face beneath a differently patterned wig. He had no need to cough

his auditors to attention. His mere rising, which resembled the slow building of a colossus, was sufficient to procure a breathless silence. He began with a smile, and a bow to the judges, who graciously inclined to receive it; allowed the smile to dwindle while he swept a glance about the court, gathering eyes upon him; then, contracting his brows and abandoning the smile altogether, confronted the prisoners for a full moment, shook his head in stern deprecation of their guilt; and launched into speech.

“May it please your Lordships, Gentlemen of the Jury; I also,” mostly bending his gaze upon the extinguished Topping, “am of counsel for the Crown and against the prisoners in this prosecution, which is certainly of a very grave and serious nature. Gentlemen, in prosecuting this cause I shall not endeavour to inflame your passions; rather to the contrary; for I believe you to be already, and justly, excited to a very great degree of indignation by the occurrences set forth in the indictment which has just been read. I shall content myself, therefore, merely with recounting and proving the truth of those occurrences by means of witnesses whose credibility cannot be denied or questioned.”

Having thus informed the jury that they might legally preserve any prejudice that might already exist in their minds against the accused, the learned Serjeant proceeded to that part of his discourse which was to give his oratorical and moral indignation free play.

“It has been observed, gentlemen, by the historian of a former period, that no grace will quieten restless minds. Notwithstanding that you have, heretofore, been visited at the regular periods of Assizes by the

able judges whose wholesome admonitions have been given from this bench with a view of reclaiming the licentious spirit of the tumultuous; notwithstanding the many strong and salutary provisions of the legislature to coerce, punish, and deter offenders; notwithstanding the alarming burst of rebellious outrages, violence and rapine, which in other districts have disturbed public tranquillity; notwithstanding the proud and manly exertions of the loyal inhabitants, who will forever subdue the destroyers of public safety and domestic comfort; notwithstanding the merciful magnanimity of a temperate legislature in giving pardon and amnesty to other deluded and infatuated rabbles; we still have cause to lament that insidious and wicked men have continued to seduce the unwary, and to plunge into dangerous associations the unhappy men whose case has caused you to be thus assembled."

The Serjeant, having manœuvred his unwieldy sentence into a final dignified posture, took a manner slightly more conversible and resumed.

"'Tis wonderful, is it not, gentlemen? how the characteristic credulity of the lower orders still continues to be duped by a few contemptible, depraved, and insidious leaders, who are grown hardened, desperate, and practised in seduction. From such beginnings as this, nocturnal and barbarous outrages have been loosed in other countries; and a paltry banditti of the lowest description has inflicted torments unspeakable upon the peaceable and unprotected cottager; and shameful to tell, the native chastity of females has been violated by licentious brutality. The cries of the distracted father and mother, the shrieks of the daughter, have pierced the attentive ear of government; and

government is determined henceforth to nip all such insurrections as this in the bud, by imposing observance of those salutary statutes against civil disorder; of which, dating along the line of our Kings until this present time, I find the number to be no fewer than ninety-eight!"

He paused to allow this instance of his learning its full effect. Clerks, after a momentary glance of awe, bent their heads again till the quill tickled their right ears; the prisoners stolidly gazed. A judge leaned towards his learned brother with an approving nod. The Serjeant resumed:

"But the statute to which I particularly call your attention is that of the 15th and 16th of the King, a law to prevent tumultuous risings. It is under that Act that these men are charged. If I succeed in proving my case, they will suffer its penalties. Gentlemen, you have the finest country and the best constitution in the habitable world; and whilst every other part of Europe has been distracted by anarchy, and finally sacrificed and devoted to the iron tyranny of a military despot, we are come to administer justice here in the sacred temple of the law, where no hasty decision or intemperate conduct shall contaminate your proceedings or derogate from the pre-eminent virtue of the British Constitution."

His duty to oratory done, the learned Serjeant began to tell in somewhat less inflated language the story of the twenty-fourth day of June, in the fifty-sixth year of the reign of the King.

"You must know," said he, suiting his tone to his matter, and abandoning the sinister deeps of his voice, "you must know, that upon this day certain gentlemen

of this town and elsewhere, having in mind the combination of a pleasure party with the advancement of knowledge, set out on horseback for a hill-top some miles distant, on which may be perceived, by the curious eye, an erection or mound of earth; whose nature these gentlemen, with the approbation of those concerned, the owner and tenant of the land, proposed to investigate. This plan, I say again, had long been known to the tenant, a farmer by the name of Goard; and had, no doubt, been discussed in his household. That it must have been so discussed, we know from the unhappy result; the sudden intrusion of a band of men upon this little gathering of unsuspecting, inquiring gentlemen, disguised, armed, and bearing every appearance of having been organised for violence and crime.

“Now what, may we suppose, was the reason for this armed incursion? Were the gentlemen trespassing upon these men’s land? No; for we have seen that the approval of both farmer and landlord had been gained. Was the purpose of these gentlemen such as to bring upon them reproach, and to call for the armed intervention of these countrymen? Was their purpose unlawful, was it harmful to the public good, was it calculated to inflame the lower orders with a sense of some injustice or irregularity? What was their purpose? Gentlemen, I will tell you. It was this: to ascertain, by means of digging and trenching, what had been, in past ages, the purpose of this monument or erection of earth; the results of which inquiry they proposed to embody in a report which might be presented to—to such learned societies as might be gratified by the attention. This, and this only, was the object of those eight or nine gentlemen in visiting Danbury Hill on the

twenty-fourth day of June; and I wish, gentlemen, that I myself might never have been less innocently employed."

This confession of frailty moved the jurymen, who being thus assured of his humanity, a fact of which they had been previously in some doubt, gave him their complete attention.

"Now, in this," pursued the Serjeant, mildly, "the eye of the plain citizen can discern no wrong; nor can the gaze of the lawyer, trained to observe the flaws and imperfections of human behaviour, perceive any outrageous incitement to violence in this scientific expedition. But, gentlemen, we have not now to deal either with plain men or with lawyers. We have to bend our apprehensions to infamous depths if we will see with the prisoners' eyes; for that which blinded them, which lashed them to this fury, during which they did not scruple to threaten and severely wound a magistrate—that dark power is, I thank Heaven, hardly to be comprehended by us. Superstition, child of ignorance! Superstition, mother of dread! That, gentlemen, is the name of the force that drove these unhappy men to what I fear, yet sternly insist, must be their doom."

Upon this close the Serjeant threw a swift appraising look at the jury. They sat quietly, with the dumb, absent look of men listening to a very grand sermon far over their heads. But the Serjeant, who wished not to stupefy, but to convince, was displeased. Resigning the rounded periods, controlling his tendency to fall into rhetoric, he came back to simple narrative.

"On Danbury Hill, at three o'clock of a summer's afternoon, these gentlemen were gathered. Two workmen, acting under their orders, had cut, with spades,

a trench across the mound; and already one or two objects—of archæological importance, but which I will not detain you by describing—one or two such objects, I say, had been revealed. Their discovery led to a lively debate among the gentlemen, all in the friendliest manner, and a great many learned conclusions were drawn. At this interesting moment the party was augmented by two gentlemen on horseback, Sir Hilary Pomfret and Captain de Lannion, late our gallant enemy, but captured, and now on parole in Sir Hilary's house. These two, without descending from their horses, watched the excavations. Mark that; without descending from their horses. Sir Hilary asked why the digging went on so slowly, why they did not have more workers, and was answered—I assure you I do not invent or exaggerate—that it was impossible to induce any labouring man of that neighbourhood to set spade in that hill, because of a superstitious abhorrence or fear attaching to it; and that the respectable men at that moment manipulating their spades had been brought for the purpose from Pliny Abbots—one proof the more, if any were needed, of the excellent good sense and judgment of this town, whose representatives you are.”

He bowed slightly to the jurors, who bent in return like so many heads of barley to a breeze. They had abandoned their sermonized look, and were leaning forward, held by the story.

“Sir Hilary Pomfret, on being assured of this, did as any enlightened man must have done. He laughed, and told the antiquarians that they might use his authority to secure what labour they pleased; little thinking, poor gentleman, that the labourers so long cherished by him and his family were at that very moment arming against

him; little dreaming that the authority, of which he so confidently boasted, was so soon to be set at naught! Thus engaged in conversation, Sir Hilary failed to observe the gathering storm-clouds. It was his companion, the French captain, who, with that sure gaze peculiar to men of the sea, first descried the advance of these deluded people. Sir Hilary, apprehending no violence, but fearful lest words might be spoken offensive to polite female hearing, very thoughtfully, and very fortunately, secured the retreat of the only lady of the party, who was at once escorted by her uncle, the Rector of Thrope, to her carriage. The lady and her uncle being gone, Sir Hilary spoke to the insurgents, who had approached and surrounded the party. They were armed—our witnesses will swear to it—with implements of their calling, such as mattocks, pitchforks, and the blades of scythes. As nearly as can be judged, there were some twenty-five to thirty of these men, among whom were the prisoners. Sir Hilary asked them why they came there in that manner, which he warned them was unlawful, and required them to lay down their arms. ‘You have no cause here,’ said he, ‘for turning your plough shares to swords.’ He spoke as a magistrate, wisely and temperately, exhorting and warning them. Their answer was—I give it to you, gentlemen, in words which witnesses will swear to—‘You shall bring no curses on us. What’s buried at Danbury had best lie still, under the earth that was put to hold it. We will not have it freed, to bring misery among us.’”

The Serjeant waited, with an ironical smile, deliberately checking his story to whet his listeners’ interest. There was no sound in court. He took up the tale.

“At these words, Sir Hilary’s contempt found vent

in laughter; and, turning his horse, he ordered the two men, leaning upon their spades in the pit, to proceed. On which, with no further warning than a brutal outcry, these thirty armed, disloyal, and wicked ruffians set upon the defenceless gentlemen. Stones were flung, the two unfortunate men in the pit were trampled, and earth was stamped down upon them. All was in disorder. In this first onset a stone, cowardly thrown, took Sir Hilary upon the side of the head. He fell. His horse, and that of his companion, reared in terror. The assailants, seeing Sir Hilary down, were dismayed. They gave back, retreated; and seeing Sir Hilary still lie senseless and motionless, in sudden panic dispersed, flying down the hill in all directions, hiding behind the hedges, casting themselves into the ditches by the road. The gentlemen who had been maltreated did not pursue, nor attempt any return of violence, as they might justly have done. They contented themselves with taking good note of the appearance of the ruffians, and conveying Sir Hilary's inanimate limbs to the neighbouring farmhouse, whose worthy tenant offered all the assistance that goodwill could prompt, or detestation of the crime call forth. What must have been this unhappy man's sensations on hearing that the chief instigator and perpetrator of the crime was—his own son!

“Gentlemen, these are the events on which you are called upon to pronounce. I have said to you nothing that I cannot prove; and I call upon your aid to help the cause of justice, in the name of our Lord the King, during whose reign of more than half a century this realm has experienced a continued series of graces and favours. We are all of us here to-day engaged in a common cause, to protect the civil and religious liberty of mankind in

this her best asylum. The best and most valiant of our youth are but newly returned from fighting freedom's battles. Let us determine, with the aid of Providence, and the vigour of the law, to make this England of ours a land fit for heroes to dwell in."

III

This peroration was received by the judges with approving nods, by the clerks with a scurrying of pens, by the galleries with murmurs and subdued clapping, and by the jurymen with entire impassivity. The accused men did not appear to pay much attention, but sought among the faces ringing them round for those known to them; or knotted their hands together between their knees; or quickly spitting on palms smoothed their unkempt hair. The first witness, Mr. Finn, was loudly called and inaudibly sworn. The examination began for the Crown.

"Your name?"

"George Withington Finn."

"And your profession or employment?"

"I have held the charge of commissary of stores, provisions, and forage to the King's forces, but I have retired these three years."

"Do you recollect anything particular happening on the twenty-fourth day of June last?"

Mr. Finn did recollect a great many things, with care and a blunt honest certainty. He had the face and figure of a good witness; did not delay with his answers, nor stray into expressions of personal opinion. The King's counsel permitted him to tell his story without much questioning; and he recounted in his own way, and very fairly, the facts of the digging, the assembly, and the

assault. Then came the vital questions of identity and provocation.

"You say Sir Hilary harangued these men?"

"He did, sir. That is to say, he called them all fools, asked them if they knew who he was, and mocked somewhat at their appearance."

"Why was that?"

"Their faces were blacked, sir. Sir Hilary told them they were a very ludicrous sight. For my part I did not think it laughable."

"While Sir Hilary spoke, did you have opportunity to observe their faces?"

"One or two."

"Could you identify these one or two men?"

"I could, sir."

"Look about in the court, and say if you discover any person who was one of the party."

"I believe I see them among the prisoners, but at this distance I cannot be sure."

"Go closer. Go down from the box."

Mr. Finn went down into the well of the court and stood before the prisoners. They were not ordered to stand, but one or two, as the gentleman surveyed them, rose from habit to their feet. He required one man to open his mouth, another to hold up his hand. Frank he passed by. At last, turning to the judges, he announced that he had done; that he was now prepared to identify two of the men.

"Let us hear how you do it."

"It is by certain marks. The fourth man from the right—I do not know his name, but I remember how four of his front teeth were missing, the four upper teeth between the eye-teeth. It gives him, when the

mouth is open, an appearance like a dog. I remember it well."

"The name of that man is Joseph Whittle. Will you swear that he was among the assailants?"

"Yes, sir. And likewise the man with the red neckerchief, by the colour of his hair."

"That man is named Isaac Goard. Do you swear that he too was among the assailants?"

"I do, sir. Of the others I have no recollection. I cannot say whether or not they were the men concerned."

"One moment, Mr. Finn. All the faces you say, were blacked. Were there no exceptions?"

"None that I saw."

Genially the Serjeant released his witness to the terrier-like worryings of Mr. Tooke, who walked up and down a few steps very stiffly, then suddenly barked:

"How near were you, sir, to these men, during the assault?"

"How near?"

"That is what I said, sir. The English language. If you are at all deaf I will speak louder——"

"I am not deaf. I cannot say, to a yard or two, how near I was to them."

"Give us some idea. Were you the length of this court away?"

"Much nearer."

"Ah, much nearer! As far, perhaps, as between the prisoners' bar and the box where you stand?"

But Mr. Finn, seeing the trap, would not walk in.

"Rather nearer, sir; rather nearer. About the distance from which I inspected the prisoners; I was about that far away."

Foiled, Mr. Tooke asked one or two more questions, without much hope, for this was not the shakeable kind of witness; and Mr. Finn stood down.

He was succeeded by several antiquaries. The gentleman with the yellow waistcoat wore it still, but had buttoned his coat tightly over it in deference to the presence of the judges. The advocate of Rome was as positive in the confined realm of fact as in the larger range of historical conjecture. Between them, the antiquaries recognised, and identified positively, six out of the nine defendants. Not one made mention of Frank. Melian, leaning forward, held her breath each time the dock was scanned, and as the danger passed, softly released it. The antiquaries having been dismissed, hope came back to her. Her evidence need not be in the nature of a forlorn stand against odds; rather, it would be the following up of a victory. Thus eased, she could listen with detached interest to succeeding witnesses, who had observed the men in unusual places at strange times, or had overheard talk that sounded like conspiring. She could even laugh at a woman, the keeper of a drinking-shop known as the Gaping Goose, who testified that on the evening of June 24th two of the men had come to her tap with dirty faces, so that she asked if they were sweeps. They put her off, and went on with their talk. She heard one say, who from the motion of his hand appeared to be telling some sorrowful tale, "of all the dismal dins anybody ever heard, that was the most dismallest, and I had rather be clemmed to death than be in such a stir again."

But what he was alluding to she did not know, only it might have been this assault, being in the same evening.

When, in all, some twelve or fourteen witnesses had been examined the Serjeant called at last the name Melian had been dreading to hear: that of Mrs. Goard. The woman of Danbury Farm came into view, standing passive, looking malignant; the ugly furrows in her face showed deep in the light coming downwards from high windows.

The Serjeant asked her if she had not previously made a deposition, stating all she knew of the events of the day. She answered that she had, but had come to be questioned, so that the whole matter might be made clear. Her husband was nigh-on mad, she said, with the shame of it; such a frightful thing to be done on his land! And she too was sorry that such a good landlord and kind gentleman should be hurt, and come to harm on Danbury Hill.

Melian stirred restlessly, not recognising this tone.

"You deposed, did you not, that your husband was absent on this day?"

"He was, buying ewes at High Barley, six mile off."

And she went on to tell how Isaac—her half-son, she called him—that was a wanderer and whom they seldom saw, came that morning, after his father was gone, to Danbury Farm. Her story ran in short sentences, with an occasional local word whose meaning counsel had to supply; the earth, or mud of the lane was "claddy" that day, stiff; she was hanging clothes to dry upon a "winterhedge," or clothes-horse. But she was clear enough as to her facts. Isaac had asked for his father. She told him he was gone out; and said that, since Isaac had come, he might help her by stirring the clothes in the copper, it being washing day with her. Isaac answered that he had other things to do; and

when she asked what things, only answered: things it were as well for her not to know. And he warned her to keep all day within doors, which she did, for fear of him, knowing him to be wild and violent at times. Later on, during the morning, she saw other men going into one of the outbuildings, where the tools were kept; they were not men she knew, strangers. Then she saw the party of gentlemen come along the lane on horseback, and go up the hill.

“Did you make no attempt to warn the gentlemen that mischief was intended?”

She did not know that it was so; she thought the men might have come to the outhouse for gambling, and playing at cards. And Isaac was watching, who had forbidden her to set foot outside.

“In fact, you were in fear for your own safety?”

“Yes. I did not dare give any warning. But when the clergyman and the young lady came later, they went close to the house; and then I did tell them that there was a danger, and not to be going up the hill.”

“You did not specify the danger more particularly?”

“I did not dare, lest I might have been overheard.”

Melian began to be very sure of one thing; and that was, that whoever suffered for the outrage it would not be Mrs. Goard, who was taking good care of her skin, and her respectability, and her husband's farm. She admitted cowardice—that fury! She played for safety: and dimly, in this, Melian began to see some scheme, some cause for hope, which her father's tranquillity confirmed, for he sat looking contentedly down on Mrs. Goard, with a half smile. Reassured, his daughter gave the questions her attention.

It seemed, that, about half an hour after Mr. Mont-

fort and his niece had passed, there began to be a great stir of voices in the outbuilding near which she had seen the men gathering. She was in an upper room at the time, and instantly looking out, saw a crowd emerging, carrying tools in their hands, having their faces streaked with soot, and their shirts over their coats.

"Did you recognise any of these men?" asked the Serjeant blandly, confident of his answer.

"No."

Loudly and full, out the word came. Melian felt her father's shoulders shaken with soundless laughter. Below, in the court, the learned Serjeant stood dumbly, with a face slowly suffusing.

"How, no?" said he, in a tone as determined as hers. "Your deposition says to the contrary. It is clear, and it was taken, let me remind you, upon oath, at your own request. Do you say now that you recognised no single one of the individuals concerned?"

"I did not. I was mistaken."

"Oh, ho!" said Serjeant Cockell, upon a tremendous breath. "You were mistaken? Let me refresh your memory, by referring you to your own words."

He sought among his papers, and began to read aloud.

"'I saw Isaac talking to a man in a black livery suit, whom I knew to be Frank Halfpenny.' That is what you said, six weeks ago, upon oath."

"I was mistaken."

"And here, further down, 'I had seen him often, and knew him to be coachman to the Rector of Thrope. It was a coachman's livery he wore.' That is not true, either, perhaps?"

"I was mistaken."

"Again, here. 'When the men went forward, Isaac

took Frank's arm, and ran with him, in among the crowd.' Still untrue?"

"I say, I was mistaken."

"I do not think so," said the Serjeant, bitterly. "It is I who was mistaken, and the magistrates who took your deposition, and the honourable justices, and the jurors, who have been led, by your husband's good name, to accord you the consideration due to an honest woman. You say, do you, that you maliciously lied"—he ran his forefinger down the document—"in no fewer than seven instances? Lied, being under no compulsion? Lied, upon oath?"

Mrs. Goard understood her limitations. She could not play the pathetic stop; but she took on a rough frankness that went well with her weather-beaten face.

"Why, sir," said she, "a body may be mistaken. There's nought of malice in it. I see Frank Halfpenny now, in among those men. I know, now, that the man I saw was not him. I would not swear away an innocent man's life, sir, though I suffer gaol for it myself."

"I don't doubt, madam, that such will be your fate. You deny, then, your whole deposition? You admit perjury?"

"So far as it goes regarding Frank. The rest I stand to."

"Oh, the rest you stand to? We are much obliged to you, madam. But having admitted the half of your statement to be lies, the jurors, being honest men, will know how to give the other half due credit. I have done with you, madam, as a witness; but do not imagine for one instant that the law has done with you. I have no further interrogations to put."

And Mr. Serjeant Cockell abandoned Mrs. Goard,

with an upward fling of his hands, to the questions of his rival.

Melian felt a certainty that was joy spring up in her heart. Not one person had identified Frank. The ominous Mrs. Goard, bribed, coerced, brought to reason somehow by her father, had denied seeing him. Surely, now he must be safe. But Mr. Tooke was speaking.

"Do you see Frank Halfpenny in court?"

The woman pointed with her thick bent hand to Frank where he sat.

"How long, before to-day, since you have seen him?"

"I believe, some years."

"You knew him as a boy, a youth?"

"Yes."

"As I understand it, your evidence stands in this way: that on the occasion of the gathering of the mob, you saw your son, Isaac Goard, and a man in livery talking together; but, now that you see him close, you do not recognise Frank Halfpenny as being the man in livery, or dark clothes, that you saw?"

"No, sir. That is the truth."

"But you saw two men. Are you sure that Isaac was one of these?"

"Yes."

"He is your husband's son?"

"Yes."

"It is a great grief to you, is it not, to be obliged to point out your husband's son as the ringleader of this assault?"

"Yes."

"But your sense of duty does not permit you to shield him?"

"No."

"You set family pride, affection—every tender feeling aside in order to help the cause of justice?"

"Yes."

"You are determined, are you not, to speak the whole truth, so that the true culprits may meet with the punishment they deserve?"

"Yes."

"In spite of menaces?"

"Yes."

Stunned by the impudence of this behaviour on the part of his rival, who had put into the witness's mouth the words he required, thus saving much time, Mr. Serjeant Cockell's face took a deeper hue, and his voice took a deeper note, as he protested. Mr. Tooke received very meekly the judge's reprimand. He had gained his end, which was, to send Mrs. Goard from the box with something of the aura of a Roman matron or Spartan mother, or other remote heroic female type, hovering above her shawl. And he had succeeded, for the jurors looked at her, as she descended, with interest and respect. They were townsmen all. They knew nothing whatever of the household at Danbury Farm. Isaac Goard, for aught they knew, might be the apple of his step-mother's eye. A woman who would swear to the guilt of her own man's son, and put it off from a stranger; a woman who would own to a mistake—there were not many such; surely she was to be believed?

Another name was called, unintelligible; but the man who answered it Melian knew. It was the French prisoner, the dark sailor whom she had pitied at Mawdry, and liked for his calling and for his eyes. He looked very foreign, here among these Saxons, yet there were many men in court as dark-complexioned. It was, she

thought, the quick crisp movements that set him apart, and the neat head, shaped like the engravings she had seen in her uncle's books, of Roman emperors; sunk close upon the shoulders, with a low, broad forehead, and close-growing hair like a wig. He made a little bow to their lordships, and turned to answer the Serjeant's interrogations.

"Your name," Mr. Cockell began with his customary pompous utterance, "is Marie-Yves de Lannion?"

But since the learned gentleman, from the most honourable motives of patriotism, had never mastered the pronunciation of French, he rendered the witness's Christian names, Marry-Wives; at which a sudden gust of laughter blew up in court. The witness nodded, however, and the Serjeant, continuing after a glare or two, made his examination a short one; confining his questions, not to the facts of the assault, which were already sufficiently established, but to the identity of the assailants.

"You, sir," said the Serjeant, "enjoyed the benefit of being somewhat elevated above the crowd, upon the back of a horse. Did you take the opportunity to observe any of the faces in the crowd?"

"No. The faces were blackened. I had not seen them before. I would not know them again."

"The clothing, perhaps?"

"I saw that all the men were travestied."

"All?"

"I think, yes. But my horse was troublesome, I had little time to observe."

"Your horse was restive?"

"If you please."

The witness looked perplexed, and his questioner,

speaking more loudly, as though to a deaf man, repeated:

"Restive. Would not keep quiet."

"No, sir; my horse was afraid of the men all about him."

"Ah, the men were all about. Did any of these men address—speak to Sir Hilary?"

"To threaten, yes."

"Do you recollect any of the words that were employed?"

"They said," answered the witness without hesitation, "that they would have no interfering. They called to the men digging, 'Down shovels.' They said Sir Hilary must go off the hill, or it would be worse for him."

De Lannion swore to these expressions, but the Serjeant could not succeed in establishing, by means of his evidence, any proofs of the speakers' identity. He had seen no figure in livery; had not observed the throwing of the stone. Against Frank nothing more was elicited. The Serjeant soon, and with some relief, handed his witness over, for the strain upon the learned gentleman had been great, of clipping his sonorous phraseology to a foreigner's comprehension.

A foreigner; this was Mr. Tooke's cue. A foreigner, and only not an enemy by the accident of a recent British victory or two, daring to accuse Englishmen of threats and cowardice! Mr. Tooke attacked from the first moment of encounter.

"You are a Frenchman, sir? Speak up, let the jury hear you."

"I am born in France."

"Pray answer my question. It is simple. I ask if you are a French citizen?"

"No longer, sir."

"What then, sir? I imagine that England has not the honour to claim you, save as a prisoner of her invincible arms."

"I am a citizen, I have fought for the United States of America, as many gentlemen of my country have done."

"Of your country! Come, come, let us get this clear. Are you a renegade from France or are you not?"

"I am not, I am a citizen——"

"We have heard all that. You are a citizen of the United States, so-called. But you were born in France, you say. Yet you do not fight for France. Is not this to be a renegade?"

The witness did not answer, but looked at Mr. Tooke with darkening eyes, above which the brows met.

"Since when," Mr. Tooke resumed, "have you fought for the United States?"

"Since 1812."

"Was not that, 1812, the year in which the fortunes of your native land began to decline?"

"The fortunes of Napoleon, yes."

"France was distressed, bled white by the Russian campaign. At the moment when she had need of all her manhood, you slipped away?"

"I took my sword to another war."

"Less dangerous, perhaps?"

"I do not know. More successful, certainly."

Mr. Tooke, enraged at this, for he had suffered in pocket from the ravages of the American privateers, barked out:

"It is indifferent to you, then, so that you are successful, under what flag you fight?"

The witness smiled, and answered with a gesture that drew in the whole court:

"The enemy is always the same."

Mr. Tooke regained command of his temper.

"You hate England; it is excusable. Her victories have earned the hatred and envy of her foes. But if I can prevent it, no Englishman's life shall hang upon the oath of his enemy." Then, thrusting abruptly, "Come, sir, awhile ago you did not understand a very simple English word, spoken directly to you. Do you mean to tell my lords, and this jury of Englishmen——"

"Mr. Tooke, Mr. Tooke," from one of the justices, "we are not trying the nationality of the witness."

"I had not finished speaking, my lord, with all respect. I was about to ask the witness, how he could swear to the expressions used by the assailants, when he is nonplussed and silenced by such a very ordinary word as the word 'restive,' spoken a few minutes since by counsel for the Crown?"

But the witness, too, had hold of his temper again, and Mr. Tooke could not draw him. He persistently swore to the words he had heard, or at least to their substance, saying that the tone of menace was alike in all tongues, and not to be mistaken. By a system of defence composed of bare negatives and affirmatives, he kept Mr. Tooke at bay. When at last he stood down, Frank was still unrecognised, and had been sworn to by no single witness.

There was but one more person to give evidence for the Crown. Even before the ushers loudly demanded him, there was a stir in the galleries; and when the name was given out, some in the middle ranks rose; those behind, cheated of their view, rose, too, pressing forward;

a few at the very back mounted, unchecked, upon their benches; so that it was as though the whole attendance rose to greet the ruddy green-coated gentleman, with a waistcoat like a river meadow in spring, who came forward and entered the box with an easy stride.

"My lords," said the Serjeant, "my last witness is also the chief victim of the dastardly outrage which we are met to punish; Sir Hilary Malison Pomfret." Then, to the witness with a slight bow, as though he were inviting to a glass of wine, "That is your name, I think?"

"It is."

"You are a baronet, a Member of Parliament for this county, a justice of the peace, and member of several honourable societies, are you not? And your dwelling, or dwellings?"

"Mawdry Park, in this county. In London, Brunswick Square."

"Just so. Now, sir, I will not ask you to detail the happenings of the day more particularly. As an enlightened and paternal landlord, the memory of ingratitude and disloyalty must be galling. We know, from the testimony of many reliable witnesses, that you were struck with a stone, cowardly thrown. What I require from you now is an answer to this question: Did you perceive from what quarter the missile came?"

"I did, sir."

It was a thin, languid voice, a voice that did not need to insist; generations of certainty lay at the back of it; a voice so insolent, yet so indifferent, that Melian could understand how the stone came to be flung.

"Will you tell their lordships and these gentlemen how it was that you were able to note your assailant?"

"I was on horseback, speaking to the crowd. This fellow was at the fringe of it. I saw him, as I spoke, stoop and throw."

"Would you know him again?"

"By all means."

He looked confidently towards the prisoners, who, for their part, stared back. His presence, more than any scholarly peroration, had power to quicken their interest. Most of them had lived their lives in his shadow; in his sole person were centred their politics, their religion, their mere continued bodily existences. They looked now, and could hardly believe, so great was his legend, that he could walk and speak and be clad as a man, save that upon his temple gleamed a line of purple, good evidence of his humanity; the scar of the Danbury stone.

Melian, though she would not turn, knew that during this pause her father stiffened, like a hostile dog. Upon the rail of the gallery—they were in a front bench—she could see his hand. It lay still, yet tense, as a watching animal may lie; but with these last words of Sir Hilary, it moved. The fingers struck heavily down once or twice upon the supporting wood, then spread, claw-shape, and so were held for a moment, stiff, before the energy was withdrawn to let them lie once more, listless, upon the rail.

"Will you tell us," the Serjeant went on, "if you see the man in court?"

Sir Hilary continued to survey the line of prisoners. His gaze was without anger, neither pitying nor triumphant; the eye of a god. A glass hung on his waistcoat; he fingered but did not use it. His light eyes ranged the faces, and rested.

"I see him," said Sir Hilary, "in the dock. That personage there, in the dark clothes—some sort of livery, is it? That is the man."

"That man's name is Frank Halfpenny. Do you identify him as the man who assaulted you?"

"Certainly," Sir Hilary answered, looking away from the dock, weary already of the helpless and questioning eyes.

"You have no doubt? Pardon my insistence."

"Justified, sir, justified. There have been mistakes——"

The Serjeant made a gesture which utterly disclaimed Mrs. Goard, disassociating her forever from the noble witness before him.

"—but I am sure of what I say. That is the man."

"Thank you, Sir Hilary. Now, as to the others?"

Again the light glance wheeled, paused at the dock, rested, and passed on.

"I can swear to none of them. They were so painted up, and so elegantly fitted out with white shirts and waistcoats worn inside out, that my dazzled eyes could hardly select, for admiration, one face rather than another."

The Serjeant smiled. The balconies tittered. Even the calm surface of their lordships' faces displayed a ripple.

"You cannot swear to them?"

"To them—no. At them, I do not say."

Another discreet murmur of amusement followed this answer.

"Well, well, Sir Hilary, you may have your chance of that yet. For the moment, respect for their lordships' presence must prevail."

"I will respect, sir, their lordships' official innocence."

"Sir," said the Lord Baron sternly, "you are reminded that this is a court of law."

Sir Hilary bowed to the rebuke, and the Lord Baron smiled, to show that it was administered, as his ears were spared, in an official capacity only; then, bending to his colleague, whispered something that awakened an answering smile. The Serjeant was pronouncing his last words to the witness.

"I am obliged to you, Sir Hilary. Excuse me, but you may not step down yet. My learned friend, there, has questions to put. Thank you. Thank you."

With a little more bowing the Serjeant sat, and Mr. Tooke's face emerged from the crowding black gowns.

"Will you tell the jury, Sir Hilary, how you managed to observe the man who assaulted you so clearly when your head, at the time, was turned away from him?"

"I did not say that my head was turned away. It was not, in point of fact."

"Allow me to contradict you."

"I will allow you to contradict me, sir," answered Sir Hilary, with a kind of languid surprise, "when you can bring proof of what you say."

"You yourself are the proof."

Mr. Tooke extended a hand, and with his thumb sketched in the air the line of the scar upon Sir Hilary's head.

"That mark, sir—that reddish line—is not that the scar left by the stone?"

Sir Hilary instinctively fingered it.

"What of that?"

"It runs—observe, gentlemen. Turn, sir, so that the jury may see more clearly. It might be better, indeed, if you were to step down into the court——"

Sir Hilary made no movement.

"I do not see the necessity for that."

"No? Let me direct your attention, sir, to an admirable provision of our country's courts, which permits the same methods of evidence to be employed for the prisoner as against him. If a witness may step down to inspect the prisoner more closely, the prisoner may demand, with equal justice, that the witness step down to be inspected."

One of the judges, sympathising with the reluctance of a member of Parliament thus to be made a peep-show for voters out of election time, interrogated Mr. Tooke.

"What is the object, Mr. Tooke, in thus displaying Sir Hilary's injury? That it was inflicted, has already been amply proved."

"Nor is that point in dispute, my lord," rejoined Mr. Tooke, humbly. "It is the direction of the wound to which I call attention. But since Sir Hilary is sensitive, I will myself describe its nature to the jury."

Then turning to the twelve men:

"This cut, gentlemen, which Sir Hilary does not care to have you view more closely, starts at the temple; moves backwards thence, and up almost to the crown of the head. Remember that this is a stone thrown by a man on foot at a man on horseback and the upwards direction is accounted for. What is not yet accounted for is the evident fact that the head was turned sideways when the wound was inflicted; otherwise, the missile must have struck its victim upon the forehead. I ask Sir Hilary now, does he still say that he was facing the man who flung this stone?"

"I say so."

"And saw him clearly, in the very act?"

"I say so."

"Yet your eyes do not appear in any way distorted?"

"They are not, that I know."

"Does it not seem to you a remarkable thing, to be able, in a moment of confusion, with your head turned away, to see and recognise an unexpected assailant?"

Sir Hilary looked disdainfully. Mr. Tooke shortened, yet amplified his question.

"Does it not require great perspicuity to know who it is that strikes at you from behind?"

"It is not difficult for one with a long parliamentary experience."

The judges looked down their noses at this, and there were grins among the smaller fry of counsel; but it was a shaft too sophisticated to hit many of the listeners. The general impression, however, was that Mr. Tooke had been scored off. He felt it, and continued his questions in something of a temper:

"Let us go back a little. You say that you were speaking to the crowd. Pray let us hear what you said; and let your recollection of the speech, if possible, provide us with something more easily credible."

"I will not answer for the very words," replied Sir Hilary, idly scanning the back of his own hand through his glass, "but the sense was this. I told them that they were mountebanks and fools; that their faces were very proper for Botany Bay, where the aborigines were this colour, but something wiser. I inquired if their fathers had ever expressed any doubts as to their legitimacy——"

"Nothing more?" ironically inquired Mr. Tooke, as the witness paused.

"A great deal," answered Sir Hilary, with an amused, tolerant glance, "but we must respect, as counsel for the Crown has reminded us, the official purity of their lordships' ears."

Mr. Tooke, seeing Sir Hilary unperturbed, and not caring to afford further matter for his lackadaisical wit, made a brief gesture of dismissal. The baronet stood down as though he owned the witness-box and quitted it of his own accord. All those in court followed his exit with their eyes; judges and jurors, galleries and prisoners at the bar, all admired him and believed his word, from no proof he had ever given that his word was dependable, but simply because it appeared to them that such a man, having a title and riches enough, could stand to gain nothing by lies. As he stepped through the court, an approving murmur cherished him. Melian heard voices behind her.

"I wish, my dear, that you would get a coat like Sir Hilary's. I had not seen it till to-day, but the one you have on is green at the seams."

"He wears a fine coat, but he can take it off on occasion. A fine man of his hands——"

"Why will men be forever talking of hands, and putting up fists, and such odious stuff?"

"Better a good deal, than to be always clacking of green seams, and caps, and *beaux*. As for Sir Hilary, I would take his word if he had not a coat to his back."

"Oh, so should I, he is so tall, and has such a really remarkable air of good breeding."

Serjeant Cockell consulted a list, and rose.

"My lords, we will not produce other evidence, and close on the part of the Crown. It is now past six o'clock,

and the counsel for the prisoners have no objection, if it meets the approbation of the court, to adjourn until to-morrow morning."

The Lord Baron replied:

"We have no objection to adjourn; and in that case, do the counsel on either side require anything particular respecting the jury?"

Counsel on both sides answered that they did not; whereupon their lordships permitted the jury to depart; and in pomp, departed themselves to a meal with some good wine.

IV

They walked back to the Lion and Circlet. Blown by a west wind, rain fell sparsely, giving the lighted windows and red blinds new value, in which only warmth and good cheer were remembered. There was no talk between Forster and his daughter, but he caught her by the elbow once, as she slipped, and holding her thus, piloted her over the wet cobbles to the archway of the inn.

The coffee room, when they entered it, was crowded with men; lawyers, farmers, and sprigs of local gentility, all very heartily eating chops and cursing the waiter amid a confused din of argument and laughter. Forster could find only a solitary stool, too near the great fire to be comfortable, on which he set his daughter; and making a long arm, caught a waiter hurrying by with a tower of used plates swaying upon one hand.

"This place is too crowded," said he, "is there not a private room, somewhere above?"

The waiter, peering over his tower, was understood to reply impatiently that those who didn't like crowds

should keep away from the Lion and Circlet in Assize Week.

"What with the gentlemen a-bawling and a-hollering, and the ladies upstairs a-ringing, and a-squealing," said the waiter, "I shan't get to bed myself till the cats do."

His voice and demeanour displayed a mournful pride; but Forster had no sympathy to bestow.

"Is there another room, I asked you? We cannot eat standing."

"There is another room," the waiter admitted, adding with pride, "but it's took."

"Where's the landlord?" Forster demanded, putting the waiter aside with a vehemence that caused the tower to lean outwards more perilously than before; and without waiting for an answer, flung open the door and went out. The waiter followed after a short evolution, like the beginning of a hornpipe, which restored the balance of the plates, and Melian was left alone.

She did not look about her. She was tired of eyes. She sat in a manner that did credit to her aunt's training, looking down at her own hands, her bonnet, which she longed to pull off, altogether hiding her face. She was aware of movements about her. There was a pushing back of chairs, somebody mended the fire, and at length a pair of top-boots came within the field of her vision to take their stand by the hearth. The boots were shabby but slender; not farmer's boots, though they were stained by riding, nor lawyer's boots, certainly; and they were too well-worn for a sprig. She ventured to lift her glance to satisfy curiosity, and perceived that it was the French prisoner, Sir Hilary's companion, who stood, unaware of her, looking down into the leaping fire.

She could see his profile outlined against the glow, the short eagle nose, and the thrusting beard upon a chin already strong. There was a signet upon the hand that held his gloves, with the device upon it of an armed head; she was close enough to see even that, in the light of the burning oak logs. Impulsively stretching out a hand, she touched his sleeve, spoke his name. He started and looked down.

The eyes that met hers were still distant, not recalled yet altogether from the scenes he had watched in the fire; but recognition came soon. He made his short bow over her hand, saying nothing. She spoke, hardly knowing what she said, her timidity finding silence too difficult.

"Does not that fire remind you of home?—You looked—as if you were remembering."

"France?" He shook his head. "No. We burn different wood there—quicker, more sparks. It is dryer, perhaps. In England, the very fires are calm."

She laughed, but he looked at her seriously.

"Besides, France is long ago. A sailor has not a home."

"There is his ship. How was yours called?"

"My last ship? The *Essex*, Captain David Porter."

"I have heard of her; you fought in the Pacific. What guns did she carry?" Then seeing a flicker of surprise on his face. "My brother was a sailor, but he died of a fever, at sea——"

He nodded, taking the sudden confidence for granted.

"On board it is hard for a sick man. There is no place for him, no food; the water, too, is not good. At sea, sickness kills more than the bullets. He was how old, your brother?"

"Fifteen, only a midshipman. His sloop was cruising among the Greek islands——"

"Ah! Smoking out pirates!"

"Yes. And so they buried him ashore."

De Lannion looked quickly at her.

"What name? The island, you do know it?"

"I cannot pronounce it. It is spelt——"

She began to draw, with the heel of a knife upon the cloth, great square letters.

"Kolokithia?" He pronounced it in a rapid rat-tat-tat with the last i long-drawn. "But I have been there, years ago."

"You know it?" Eagerness overcame timidity. "Oh, will you tell me please, what it is like? I sometimes imagine it; and would like to go there some day, if I might. But a woman cannot do much."

"No?" He looked at her with a long glance that caused her no discomfort, as though he measured her strength. "It is for a woman as for a man. A little courage and she may do as she wishes."

"But I am not brave."

He said, unsmiling, not in the manner of a compliment at all:

"But yes, you are brave."

She was silent with confusion, and her heart beat strongly.

He shifted his position, and she had a moment's pang of fear lest he might go. To detain him, she spoke again, hastily:

"Will you not tell me about the island?"

He lifted his head, frowning a little, as though determined to remember in detail and make her know the scene.

"It is a small island, rocky for the most part, not easy to land a boat. The rock is yellow, the colour of a lion's coat, and it goes steeply up, very high, to a great rock that is like a castle; from there, slopes down. I was there in spring once, when the long plain was like a tapestry with flowers. I do not know in English their names——"

"Forget-me-not? Speedwell?"

"I do not know. A little flower, the colour of sea water, with many white ones among it, star-shaped."

"Oh, beautiful! The scent of them!"

He shook his head.

"They have not much scent. The wild honey there has a bitter taste."

"Is there a town?"

"A few huts for the fishermen. But your brother's comrades, surely they wrote to you where he lies? It is such a strange thing, memorable, for a sailor to have a grave."

"I did not know. My father had the letters."

Silence fell between them. The noise in the room was unabated, with talk and the rattle of plates and knives. An opened door admitted further din from the tap-room, with a gust of unpleasant air, and finally, Mr. Galliard, who stood with his hand upon the knob, searching the coffee-room with his eyes. Seeing De Lannion almost at once—for he still was standing—Galliard advanced, calling above the racket in mincing tones:

"Here you are! That was a damned silly trick to play, slinking in here. We are waiting—Sir H., madam—all of us. A damned silly trick!"

"You don't see a lady, I think," De Lannion answered quietly.

Mr. Galliard came closer, peered into the depths of the bonnet, and almost started. His hand went to his stock, a pattern of neatness, but which he was conscious of having tied in haste. For some reason he cast an apprehensive glance at the door, before he bowed, and brought up the familiar simper.

"You, Miss Forster! How much too long it is since we last met! I am enchanted"—another apprehensive glance—"but this is not the place—you are not, surely, here alone? Unprotected, with this rabble?" His disdainful eye included the Frenchman in its sweep. "Let me escort you——"

"I have Captain de Lannion to take care of me," she answered resentfully.

"Alas, and I must tear him away," said Mr. Galliard, with a comical assumption of despair, "yes, positively." Then, in another voice to De Lannion: "Sir H. is waiting."

"My horse has cast a fore-shoe," De Lannion answered him, "I must wait, and follow."

"A convenient fore-shoe," Mr. Galliard said, with a laugh, "but I shall not quarrel with that statement. I understand the reason for it only too well. Yes, decidedly, a convenient fore-shoe."

"Where is Sir Hilary?" De Lannion asked, ignoring this playfulness.

"Why, as to that, in the private room upstairs, swearing. You had better make your apologies; go and try him with the fore-shoe. If Miss Forster will accept my company, I will take upon myself the task—task!—the heavenly good fortune of entertaining her to the best of my poor power."

Mr. Galliard smiled confidently, smoothed down his

coat-breasts, drew in his remarkable waist, and generally prepared for conquest. De Lannion hesitated, and Melian knew that he would not, in her presence, resent the tone. She spoke for him.

"Cannot a servant go? Where is the bell?"

The waiter hurried by. She caught him by the coat-tail and brought him, indignantly looking over his shoulder, to a standstill.

"Inform Sir Hilary Pomfret," said she, "that this gentleman's horse is lamed, and so he cannot be ready."

At Sir Hilary's name, the waiter ceased to look daggers, and stood docilely, receiving with reverent attention the sacred words intended for Sir Hilary's ears. Mr. Galliard sourly watched; and when the man had departed, said in an idle tone:

"You make good use of servants, Miss Forster, do you not? Apropos; odd is it not, to see an old acquaintance in such a *trying* situation——"

He laughed, and Melian, for the moment, did not understand; then, while the question as to his meaning was still in her mouth, she remembered the darkened corridor and the letter surprised in Frank's hand. Despite herself, she blushed.

"The coachman," he went on, with an innocent air, "do you remember the assignation in my uncle's house? You owe me something for my discretion on that occasion, I think." He glanced at De Lannion, and continued:

"But I am no Jew. I make no claim. Do not fear me, Miss Forster, I am excellent at secrets. There is nothing will hold two persons together like a good, delicate secret."

"You saw me," said Melian steadily, above her rising

anger, "you saw me give Frank a letter for my father. I do not know what is so secret in that."

"Nor do I," said he lazily. "I do not perceive any need for secrecy in a letter to a father."

He was experienced in just that kind of word-play. She realised it, and did not press her denial; yet to quit the subject abruptly might seem to lend it importance. De Lannion broke the tension, saying:

"Frank? Is that not the man who is accused——"

"Of breaking Sir H.'s head? Yes," Mr. Galliard caught him up. "The fellow's own idea entirely. No prompting needed; nothing to be gained, no resentment *fostered*." And once more they heard his little laugh.

"Why do you say that?" Melian asked angrily. "There is nothing against Frank—nothing and nobody."

"Excepting Sir H.," gently contradicted Mr. Galliard, "always excepting Sir H."

"At any rate," said she, "I speak for him to-morrow."

"By Jove," murmured Mr. Galliard, "I begin, do you know, in spite of everything, quite to envy this fellow."

"And I shall say," she went on defiantly, choosing not to heed, "that he was not there."

"Unfortunately," said Mr. Galliard softly, "you were not there, either. Is not that amazingly unfortunate? But such fervour, such concern—why, I think the prisoner is a lucky man, indeed."

Melian could no longer bear this double talking, the insinuations and accompanying sly smile.

"Mr. Galliard," said she, and rose, "will you go away?"

The even tenor of his countenance was disturbed.

Could it be, his forehead seemed to ask, that she did not find him fascinating?

"I don't think, madam," said he, taken aback, "that I understand you."

"Yet I speak plain enough," said she, an echo of her father in her voice. "I ask you to go away. I do not wish to talk to you any longer."

Mr. Galliard, while he could no longer be in doubt as to her meaning, at least could cover his retreat.

"A lady's wish," said he, simpering still, "is law. And a lady's law is her wish. May the judges, madam, read their verdict in your eyes, instead of in their tomes of Selden and Coke. I take my leave——"

But Melian withdrew her hand, and sat bolt upright waiting for him to go. His lips parted. Doubtless some further disquieting sentence was on them, but it was not uttered. She felt a hand on her shoulder. It was her father, who had approached the group unseen.

"Well, gentlemen," said he, "I am obliged to you for keeping my daughter company. Talk, so far as I can see, must stand her in lieu of dinner. There is no place to eat here, and the only other room is occupied. It is a public room," he went on, with mysterious anger, "but a certain gentleman has required it privately; and so my daughter must do without her dinner. I hope you talked, at least, of something substantial."

Melian knew from her father's manner that it was Sir Hilary who occupied the coveted room, and that this was one more injury to go down upon the score. She did not answer, but Mr. Galliard, as ever, was ready.

"I was about to ask Miss Forster," said he, "if we

were likely to have her delight us at the forthcoming ball."

"What ball is that?" Forster asked suspiciously.

"Oh," said Mr. Galliard, with a superior titter, "I do not refer to the subscription affair at the Assembly Rooms. One could not be seen at that. I referred to the ball at Mawdry, to which, no doubt, Miss Forster has received an invitation. Everyone who is anyone has received an invitation. It is quite our touchstone."

And he surveyed Forster with insolence.

"Sir Hilary gives a ball, does he?" said Forster, his eyes narrowing.

"He does. Should Miss Forster honour us, may I solicit the favour of a dance?"

"I think not," Forster answered shortly, "my daughter is in no such straits for a partner as that would suppose."

Mr. Galliard gave something of a gasp. Forster continued:

"When my daughter dances at Mawdry she shall have the choosing of her own company; and from the highest."

De Lannion, upon whom the little scene had not been lost, but who had not the key to it, looked from the grim and smouldering face to the malicious one; and coming back to Forster, his own eyes took on an expression, quick and alert, as of a man reckoning the nearness of some danger. For no reason, Melian turned towards him; for no reason, he moved closer to her. A voice came from behind them, and the group wheeled.

"Well, Galliard, Lannion, what are you about? Why must you stand gossiping in the tap, or whatever place

this is? I am quite ready to go; have been this half-hour——” Sir Hilary broke off short in his leisurely scolding. He had seen Forster, and was recognising him slowly.

“I beg your pardon, sir, your face seems familiar. Excuse me if I have intruded upon you——”

Sir Hilary paused. Still he could not place the features, and Forster would not help him. He lifted a questioning eyebrow at Galliard; but that gentleman, who had feared just such a meeting as this from the first moment of encountering Melian, would not meet his eye. Sir Hilary looked more closely, searching his memory; nearly had it; lost it again; and was about to depart when, his eye chancing upon Melian, he halted. Here recollection did not fail him; the drive from Danbury to Mawdry had not gone by in complete unconsciousness. He came to her, and after a close look, taking her hand said:

“But as to you, madam, I cannot be mistaken. You are, I think, that lady who rescued me on the 24th of June, Mr. Montfort’s niece. I owe you much more than I can ever repay; my health; my very life—yes,” as she made a gesture of astonishment and denial, “my life; for Doctor Sabin tells me that had the cold got to my wound——”

He shrugged the unpleasant consequences away, and went on, with a very good simulation of feeling:

“I have thought often, believe me, of the courage that drove those many miles supporting a wounded man. May I hope that you have not forgotten it?”

Melian was utterly at sea, distressed beyond measure by her father’s utter silence and Sir Hilary’s apparent unconsciousness of any strain. She did not answer.

"Nay, I know you have not," Sir Hilary continued gracefully, "for you are here to tell of it in court. Well, if I am in your debt, you are in mine; it is a responsibility to restore a man to life, and the possibility of further mischief. Do you not think so?"

He was laughing at her, by his manner setting the two of them apart from all listeners. Forster, Galliard on excitement's tiptoe, De Lannion the onlooker did not exist, and their possible comments were negligible while Sir Hilary Malison Pomfret talked. Still he had not done.

"That being so, you owe me a favour. Will you give it?"

"What is it?" she muttered.

"Will you come to my ball? I give one at Mawdry in ten days' time. Will you not give me the pleasure of expecting to see you there? The pleasure of standing up at least once with you?"

She could no longer sustain the burden of this talk upon her own shoulders. Her eyes appealed to Forster.

"If my father will allow me——"

"He will allow you," Sir Hilary assured her, as though Forster were not present. "It is settled, then. I shall look forward."

He stooped over her hand, and with a careless nod to Forster and a gesture that summoned the two other men to follow him, went out of the room as a victorious general might retire from a battlefield. Mr. Galliard followed with somewhat less dignity, being alarmed to panic by Forster's demeanour, and dreading possible fisticuffs in a tavern under the eyes of the law. De Lannion lingered to say to Melian:

"I wish you a safe journey, and a good night."

"We stay here. I shall have no journey."

“Only good-night, then, and courage!”

He went. Suddenly taking a chair beside her, leaning his body across so as to fend his words from the listener's ears—for the whole company had recognised Sir Hilary, and the noisy talk had dropped to whispers while he stayed—her father said to her:

“Why did you take that man's hand?”

“I did not,” she answered, her mind upon De Lannion; “you saw he did not touch me.”

“Not that French poodle,” said he impatiently, “the other.”

The contemptuous expression struck full upon something in her as yet new-born and tender; before she could answer, he went on:

“I do not choose to recall certain events to your mind; but I think that the female delicacy, of which we hear so much, should prevent you from taking that man's hand.”

“Why his hand, more than yours?” she answered, her voice shaking with the effort to keep it low. “Of course I will not go to the ball, but why did you not speak—forbid it?”

“Yes, you shall go to it,” said he, “you shall go, and dance with all the French fiddlers and lap-dogs you please. You have a right to go; and now that you have given your word, you shall stick to it, by God! Since you shake that man's hand, you will not object to stand up with deserters and fops.”

“You,” said she, choking, “you insult a man who has not the power to answer you. I do not know how I can speak to you when I have seen you strike a woman and insult a prisoner.”

But not even anger was a sufficient defence against

the invading tears. She felt her throat closing, and with her last powers stammered out:

“You are cruel, you are hateful——”

With her muff held against her eyes she fled blindly from the room, hearing her father laugh behind her, and the words:

“So that’s where the wind sits! I’ll get you a better bargain than that for forty thousand pounds!”

She went to her room along corridors that seemed to sway. The maid who preceded her, turning when they reached the door, and shading her candle, was astonished to see great tears upon the young lady’s cheeks, falling fast from her wide-open eyes.

V

The judges, next morning, were early in court. The whole of the evidence for the defence was yet to be heard; and though the witnesses were not numerous, there were some fifteen or twenty affidavits to be read, while counsel for the defence must be permitted the same oratorical opportunities as his brother for the Crown had enjoyed. The judges, therefore, named an early hour, and were punctual to it.

Their retinue, feverishly mending pens, shuffling written papers and distributing piles of clean foolscap, wore a somewhat resentful look, as though for the life of them they could not tell why all this pother was made for a parcel of clod-hoppers certain to be hanged. The galleries were full, as before; the prisoners, as before lined in a row, seemed, amid the bustle, the whispers, and the earnest consultations, to be the only persons in the court who were wholly unconcerned. Their lives were like to be the spoils of this forensic war, but

for all that, they were motionless as the trophies of bronze and gold for which Homeric heroes competed; and went unregarded as these by the spectators of the fight.

Mr. Tooke was ready. He had spent the previous evening drinking a mixture of honey and lemon, highly recommended for the voice, after which he had slept indifferently; and he was ready for the fray as any man could possibly be who had twelve hours' ill-temper to work off. But his first words were all honey; no trace of lemon lurked in them.

"My lords, gentlemen of the jury; in rising to discharge this important duty which has fallen upon me to-day, I assure you that I feel a load of anxiety and solicitude far beyond anything I have ever experienced in the course of my professional life. You will not be surprised when I say so, called upon as I am to meet on behalf of nine men a charge of so serious a nature, and confronted as I am by the formidable host that has been called into the field by the Crown and put in battle array against me. Here, for instance, is my learned friend, Mr. Serjeant Cockell, Mr. Topping also, and Mr. Mander; all of his Majesty's counsel, and to speak of them with sincerity, stars of the very first magnitude."

Serjeant Cockell accepted this comparison with the calm of one taking his due; the Pole Star, he. Mr. Topping's ears grew crimson as the rays of Mars; while Mr. Mander, settling his brand-new wig above a muzzle-like nose, gave vent to a loud "Hrrmph"; growled forth from his throat, as if the Dog Star had been liable to any such earthly infirmity as a cough.

"To these are added," proceeded Mr. Tooke, counting down the table with a knucky forefinger, "one—two

—three—four lesser, still bright orbs; forming in the whole a cluster of northern lights sufficient to dazzle poor weak eyes such as mine into perfect blindness. Be this as it may, feeling as I do the unequal conflict in which I am engaged, notwithstanding every defect under which I too sensibly find myself labouring, I approach the discussion of this great and important case, undismayed.”

So much for the honey. Speedily the lemon followed.

“Gentlemen, in opening this case my learned friend pledged himself to a line of strictest moderation. Now I think it happened that in the warmth of argument he forgot this profession. What are the epithets that my friend, in his mildness and forbearance, has thought fit to use on this occasion? He tells you, remember, that he will say nothing to inflame your passions, which he follows by the use of such expressions as these: abominable, impudent, malicious, disloyal, wicked, and about to be consigned to absolute infamy. These are some of the epithets that I wrote down at the time with great concern, and which indeed, I am sorry to say, form but the smallest part of his invective.”

“He also referred,” continued Mr. Tooke, gathering momentum, “in what I regard as a very uncalled-for manner, to what he describes as the motives of the defendants in ascending, if they did ascend, Danbury Hill. Superstition, says the learned Serjeant—and he repeats it, with some rhetorical ornament which I will spare you, since it in no wise illuminates the point at issue—superstition was the motive; and he invites you to suppose that superstition is very reprehensible. There I cannot differ from him; but that he has proved any such motive to have lodged in the British bosoms here bared

before you, that, gentlemen, it is in my power utterly to reject and deny!

"But yet," continued Mr. Tooke, something in the manner of Mark Antony, "the learned Serjeant is an honourable man and a very bright luminary of the law. It is not easy to differ from him; and I will meet him where I can. Let us see the points on which we are agreed. First," checking it on his pulled-down thumb, "is the fact that on the 24th day of last June there was a gathering of gentlemen upon Danbury Hill. Yes, I can meet him there. What next? That the object of this gathering was harmless, not calculated to bring reproach upon the gentlemen, nor to inflame the passions of their fellow-citizens. As to that—no! There I cannot agree. And, to my mind, the epithets of mischievous and malicious had far better have been applied to those who, in numbers and with authority, go about to desecrate graves. What next?" Another finger was pulled down. "He says that a number of men advanced up the hill for the purpose of causing disorder. Undoubtedly that is so. That their faces were blacked. Yes. That they carried the implements of their trade, mattocks and scythes. Yes. That threats were uttered. Yes. (You see, gentlemen, for the next point I must have recourse to my other hand. The learned Serjeant has been five times already in the right.) What next? That Sir Hilary was struck, while he was addressing the crowd, by a stone which deprived him for a time of his senses, and might have deprived him of his very life. Yes; and all right-feeling men, among whom I hope I may count myself, must deplore that wanton injury to a just magistrate, kind landlord, and excellent man. I am with the learned Serjeant thus far. But this, you may say, is the whole

case for the Crown. Do I, then, admit all this? And if I do, what has become of the case for the defence?"

Mr. Tooke paused, and leaning forward, loosed the fingers that had gathered in all the accuracies of Mr. Serjeant Cockell, spreading them wide.

"It is just this, gentlemen. I do admit all this most fully; but not—not on behalf of the defendants. Disorder, possibly; arms, black faces, possibly, possibly. But how can it concern any one of the defendants? How can it matter to them if I say that Sir Hilary was assaulted? It cannot be any concern of theirs for this sole but excellent reason, gentlemen: that no single one of them was there on Danbury Hill at half after three o'clock on the 24th day of June."

The judges' grey wigs were lifted upon their shoulders by a faint sigh. This line taken by Mr. Tooke meant alibis, endless alibis, and when the oral evidence had been taken, a spate of affidavits. It was impossible to blame Mr. Tooke, for this was certainly the only means whereby he could hope to save his clients; the facts, otherwise, were too flagrant and too well-established. But, said the judges' demeanour, and the faces in the gallery reflected it, an alibi is tedious; no sensational defence such as Mr. Tooke might have been expected to offer. Indeed, the whole court, bench and benches alike, seemed like men who had been promised a fire-work and offered cold pudding instead.

Mr. Tooke, who cared nothing for their expectations but a great deal for his own credit—his amour propre, besides, being tickled by the imposition of such a difficult task, against such odds—relentlessly proceeded with his plan; which was to show that not a single one of the defendants, not Ebenezer Doel, nor Enoch Val-

ley, nor Samuel Sawder, nor Charles Lamy, nor Habba-kuk Sheard, nor Joseph Whittle, nor Henry Hawk——

“Old Uncle Tom Cobley and all!” sang out a vulgar voice in the eastern gallery; which, after tumult and much dignified glaring, sank, and was suppressed. Mr. Tooke waited for the disturbance to subside, and went on with his list undeterred.

“I say, that not one of the aforementioned, nor Frank Halfpenny, nor Isaac Goard, were among the mob which assailed that innocent gathering of scientifically-minded gentlemen.”

Thereupon he called his first witness, a woman who kept a public-house known as the Trumpet, three miles from Danbury, who deposed that at the time of the assault three of the men were in her house, Lamy, Sheard, and Sawder. She remembered the circumstance, she said, by reason of Sawder, who was a fine whistler, striking up a tune, so that a man, a hawker of handkerchiefs, who was there, and “pretty fresh in drink,” got up to dance and fell about in a way that was very laughable. She could not be mistaken in Sawder, who whistled famously, and was known for it through the neighbourhood.

Next came the hawker himself, who not only remembered the three men, but had met, on his way to the Trumpet, Enoch Valley in the road, and sold him a “Randall’s man.”

“What is that?” asked Sir Vauncey, opening his eyes.

“Why, sir,” answered the witness, “Jack Randall’s colours.”

“And who,” inquired Sir Vauncey, “might Jack Randall be?”

“Live in London and don’t know old Jack?” replied

the witness, aghast. "Randall, sir; the pug; the bruiser. Tell you what I'll do"—and the witness, fumbling in his clothing, swiftly produced and shook out a brilliant green handkerchief spotted with white which he tendered to the judge. "You shall 'ave this 'un cheap, to keep Jack in mind. Sevenpence, strike me blue, and that's less than I'd ask my own brother. Go on, m'lud, it'll look a treat on your jasey——"

"Mr. Tooke, Mr. Tooke," hastily said Sir Vauncey, "pray restrain your witness."

But the witness persisted, and pulled out handkerchief after handkerchief, offering Birds'-eye Wipes and Blood-red Fancies with all the fervour of the good salesman loth to miss an opportunity; and finally, in a burst of indignation at being so constantly rebuffed, struck a constable upon the ear, and was borne from the box in a flutter of yellow, red, and blue, loudly proclaiming his opinion that the honourable judges were a pair of gammy old, crummy old, coxy-loxy lobsters.

But the stream of witness was not checked. It went on, through testimonies of labourers and their wives, tradesmen, farmers, smiths; on through corroborating circumstances of purchases, and hiring, and sickness, and washing-days, and horses casting shoes; on through memories tenacious and delighted to render up details of the little events that made up their country world. And each witness, as he ended his testimony for the prisoners, was set upon by the Serjeant, questioned, badgered, and finally proved a liar, fool, and rascal to the satisfaction of the court. But Mr. Tooke had not yet unmasked his big guns. After a long tale from one Susan Harris of borrowing some Bateman's drops from Hawk's wife for her child that had the earache through

coming home after choir-practice and stopping in the road to play, "and with those Gadsdens, too"; Mr. Tooke cleared his throat to announce:

"I will now call one who was actually present at the moment of the assault, who succoured the chief victim, and who, being a young lady of excellent heart, and—still better for my purpose—excellent understanding and observation, comes here to be questioned as to the events of which she was the unwilling but undismayed witness. I call Miss Melian Forster."

"Miss Melian Forster!" the ushers repeated; and, "Miss Melian Forster!" even more loudly, sending her name ringing into every corner of the court; yet, because of the blood beating in her ears, it seemed to her to be sounded in a whisper and at a great distance. She obeyed the summons, however, trembling with the throbbing of her heart, and came to the box, where suddenly her terror fell from her, so that she could stand without support and think calmly. The dwarfish sounds swelled again to normal. It was as though she had come up through deep water to the surface of things; as though the questions about to be asked were no more formidable than those which she was accustomed to hear her aunt propound. "What, Melian, is the first duty of a female?" She could smile at the recollected answer, which did not include, and must have reprobated, any such thing as this dramatic appearance in court.

VI

She gave her evidence clearly. Her voice did not tremble, nor did she avail herself of Mr. Scatchard's permission to blush. She knew her part, and as Mr. Tooke gave her the clues one by one she caught them

up unhesitating. From the moment the questions began her fear ceased, and if she had not been obliged to look upon the prisoners from time to time and thus recall the deadly weight of her lightest word, she could almost have found enjoyment in feeling sympathy increase with her answers, the whole court grow kind. And when Mr. Tooke had done, when she faced Serjeant Cockell, he, too, was friendly. He recognised too well the temper of his audience to attempt to terrify into contradictions a sympathetic witness, and therefore brought forth his snares warily and set them softly in her path as any fowler. He went over her story again, putting pressure on no special point; until at last he came back to the incident of the coachman calling after her uncle as they went towards Danbury Farm.

"You say that he asked how long it would be before his services were once more required?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did you suppose was his purpose in putting such a question?"

"I supposed that he meant to pay his father a visit."

"From what he had said to you before you left the rectory, that is what you supposed his purpose to be?"

"Yes."

"Does it not seem that he intended you should think so?"

"It seems so."

Melian was aware that here was somewhat dangerous ground. She could not see where the pitfall lay, but knew that she must go cautiously. She caught sight of Mr. Scatchard among the attorneys, wearing an expression that said, "Careful."

"But may not this question, and this prisoner's state-

ment regarding his father, bear quite another construction?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir."

"Let me suggest to you that the statement regarding the visit to his father and the inquiry regarding the time at his disposal, which to your mind appear to show only the natural solicitude of a son, may bear quite another and more sinister interpretation."

She saw Mr. Scatchard droop his lower lip and take on a vacant stare, and gathered that she was to play the innocent.

"What other interpretation could it have, sir?"

"That is what I wish you to tell me."

"I cannot think of any other meaning."

"No? Let me suggest that he might have known of this conspiracy; that he intended to join in the assault; that he made the excuse of visiting his father as a pretext, should he be found absent from the carriage; and finally, that he asked how long he must wait in order to know if there were time to don a disguise."

"But, sir, he could not have known of it."

"Ah! Why not?"

"There was no means whereby he could have known. I am sure he did not."

"You will swear to that?"

She saw Mr. Scatchard's hand upon the table before him. It was walking here and there upon two fingers, restlessly, but so delicately——

"Let me understand the question first, sir. I am not used to the law. Will you say again, if you please, what I am to answer?"

"Do you say, on your oath, that Frank Halfpenny knew nothing of this conspiracy?"

She hesitated, seeing the place to which she had been led. She looked to Mr. Scatchard's hand for guidance; it lay still. There could be no more delay, and she answered with her most ingenuous air:

"But Mr. Tooke says there was no conspiracy. How could Frank have known of it, if it did not exist?"

Mr. Scatchard's hand upon the table applauded her silently. The Serjeant seemed taken aback.

"I will amend my question. The expedition was known at Danbury Farm a month before it took place. Had Frank Halfpenny, to your knowledge, any means of communication with Danbury Farm during that time?"

"Communication? Do you mean letters?"

"Do you know of any letter in particular?" said the Serjeant, with some little eagerness.

"No; but I suppose Frank might write. Anyone may write a letter."

"Or do you know if, during the month preceding the assault, he had any conversation with any person connected in any way with Danbury Farm?"

She hesitated. It sounded almost as though the Serjeant knew of Alice. Was there real danger, or was the question only a scarecrow put to alarm her? She had to decide in two seconds, and make her answer; win or lose, according to how much the Serjeant knew. She chose.

"I do not know that he ever had."

"Will you swear to that?"

"I cannot swear, sir, that he did not. I did not follow all the goings and comings of the servants."

"But so far as you know, he did not?"

"No, sir."

The thumping lie was out; and as she waited to know whether the next instant would expose her, she could feel the drops of moisture ooze upon her upper lip. The Serjeant gazed at her. She strengthened herself to meet his look. There was an instant's silence; then:

"Thank you, madam," said Mr. Serjeant Cockell, "you may stand down."

Safe, safe! And Frank, perhaps, saved, too! She could not believe that the questions were over, that nothing had been found out, that she was free to leave the box, still with the approbation of the court upon her, and walk out into the air. For the first time a faintness overcame her. She swayed a little as she walked down the narrow centre way of the court. An arm in a black sleeve was thrust out. She clung to it, and felt its pressure gratefully. As with her escort she moved to the door, Mr. Tooke's voice was heard again.

"This, my lords and gentlemen, is the last witness I shall call. But there are yet to be read the affidavits of witnesses unable to be present——"

The door was pulled to behind them, the voice was shut in. Another voice was at her ear; and down the lobby she saw her father coming.

"Well done, young lady!" Mr. Scatchard was crowing. "Well done, indeed! I thought at one time the Serjeant had you; but it was only a feint. They know nothing of the girl, her mother had sense to keep that dark. Mr. Forster, is not this a witness to be proud of?"

"She did very well," said her father, "better than I expected; did not lose her head. Well, I think we are safe."

"I think so, too," Mr. Scatchard agreed. "His sweet-heart will thank you, Miss Forster."

Melian, her handkerchief at her lip, suddenly asked: "But my uncle's testimony?"

The men smiled at each other.

"Never fear," said Mr. Scatchard soothingly, "never fear. Your uncle's testimony will not upset yours."

"Will they need her again?" Forster asked, closely watching his daughter, "for if they will not, she had better go home."

"By all means, a little fresh air for an hour or two," said Mr. Scatchard, nodding, "while the affidavits are read. Heavy work for a young lady's ears. No interest to be had in listening to affidavits."

"She had better be off," said Forster, taking her wrist. "Her pulse is at a canter."

"I want to hear the verdict," Melian protested. "I want to hear that Frank's safe."

Mr. Scatchard pondered.

"It will not come to-day." He looked at his silver watch. "Five o'clock, or nearly. They may get through the affidavits to-night. Then for to-morrow"—he checked the items—"there will be: speech for defence, two to three hours. Answer for the Crown, say two. Judge's summing up—rather long. Verdict, possibly, about six to-morrow. But if counsel are very eloquent, not until the following morning."

"So long?"

"It is too long for you," said her father, roughly kind. "I will take a chance and send you home to bed. John shall drive you back, and you may have the pleasure of telling the girl, eh, Scatchard? that her lover is safe."

"I think so," said Mr. Scatchard. "I think, indeed, that he is out of the wood."

Her father took her elbow and said with a laugh that was almost shy:

“Come, we’ll call first at the Lion and get your packages, and give you a drink of hot ale; then home and have your sleep out. I was short with you last night, and you did not sleep, I’ll be bound. Do not remember it any more. You’ve done well, by God! I shall find myself, if I do not take care, being proud of you.”

She resisted no longer, but with a short farewell to Mr. Scatchard, who immediately dived back into the court, set out for the Lion and Circlet upon her father’s arm. The wind came freshly, with a hint of snow upon it, bracing her weakness. She was happy, thinking of her own escape, and of the prisoners soon to be set free; happiest of all because another prisoner, one still in durance, had wished her courage and a good night.

CHAPTER TEN

DANCING CORNER

I

THE return was soon accomplished. Half sleeping, Melian watched the hills change shape as the road bent among them. The trees were ragged; it was the last of the year. In a kind of drowsy weakness she noted the sights of the road, a child drawing back in fear to a doorway, a flock of birds wheeling like leaves down the wind, the dark tips of a hare's ears showing pointed in the grass. She neither planned nor remembered, but sat silently by John's side in a delicious state remote from any thought; there was no need to choose the words that told good news.

It was darkening fast, and John touched Grenadier with the whip to bring them home before the hour for lamps; but the horse went willingly enough, knowing the road, and that his stable lay at the end of it. The slope of the rise known as Argol's Down was mounted at good speed; when the road dipped again, the hoofs' clapping echoed from cottage walls, and Dancing Corner was no more than a bare mile away. For all that, darkness was complete by the time they reached the Toll House gate. Twenty years since they might have told their whereabouts by the squeal and clink of the gallows' hanging chains; now only the white-painted gate, still faintly visible, and the horse's whinny told them that they came home.

Walter was at the door, ostensibly in order to dis-

possess Melian of her packages. Though he made some attempt at his servant's mask, curiosity was too strong, and his inquiring look asked, more eagerly than words could do, for news.

"The trial is not over," said Melian, answering it. "I am come home because they do not need me any longer."

"And Frank, miss? We knew him here. We'd be rare and sorry——"

"He is safe, they say. He will go free."

There was a sound from the top of the stairs, and the half-light showed a figure pausing, a hand at its throat.

"Is that you, Alice?" Melian called, and ran swiftly up towards it. "Alice, did you hear me? Frank is safe, my dear—only one witness against him. He was not seen at all. I did not speak to him—the witness-box is not near where he was standing; but he looked well."

From the shadowy figure, so unsubstantial in the half-light, so still, came an up-stretching, without movement of the arms, a shaking of clenched fists, a loud laugh. Melian had expected tears, anything but this. She thought it hysteria, and recoiled.

"There's for mother!" came the voice of Alice, shudderingly like that brazen voice that had yelled from the window of Danbury Farm. "Her, with her mucky lies, and her swearing, and her mooching round here to spy! Said I might drop it by the roadside for aught she'd care. Ah! She's mighty set on the ring; and poor Isaac, that she's shamed for and driven from the door like a mangy cat, because he's a bastard, she's glad for him to hang. Let her wait. She'll see me a lawful wife now, and that's more than these leezy hussies here

can say, though they hang themselves out cheap to get a man's eye. A wedded wife, and no molrowing slut, like these. I'll go out from this house with my head high, and then let 'em look, and then let 'em sneer! Like going out of hell it'll be, away from their faces, and their laugh, laugh, chitter-chat, the mocking great monkeys!"

"But, Alice"—Melian was all at sea—"have you been so unhappy? I've tried to be kind."

"Kind!" Alice, in the rage of her relief, caught her up. "It's not kindness a girl wants. It's a man. Here all these months, and no sight nor touch of Frank, and the others at me always, never to leave me be——"

"I didn't know," poor Melian said, unhappily.

"You're the mistress," Alice answered, as though that were explanation enough. But that word recalled the women to their daily selves. Voices, attitudes, changed imperceptibly to those of mistress and maid. The next sentences were those of every day.

"Oh, I had forgotten! My package of linen—will you bring it to my room?"

"Yes, ma'am; and shall I light the fire?"

"Thank you, I should be glad of it. The drive was long and cold."

Alice went down the passage, her head high, as she had promised; and in her carriage, the very swing of her skirts, was triumph.

Melian sought in vain for any trace of softer feeling, joy, love reprieved; no feature and no sign betrayed it.

II

Next day, since it was fine, though almost at winter cold, Melian could walk briskly about her garden. Still

the feeling of weakness was on her, aftermath of fear overcome; but she could talk of borders and discuss the shrubs to be purchased for next year without burdening her mind with the imagined progress of the trial. When six o'clock came, that delightful hour of firelight, she remembered that at this moment, perhaps, the hearing was ending; and setting her book down, she could picture the judges—no longer, to her, terrible—charging the jury, pointing out that for lack of proof they must let the prisoners go. It was a comforting picture, yet two unbidden memories disturbed it; the words of Serjeant Cockell in setting forth the case, of the outrages in other counties, and Mr. Scatchard's comment, that nowadays all judges were afraid of the Ludds. This being so, perhaps one or two of the men might be transported to Botany Bay for a very few years. This was the heaviest sentence her imagination could permit; the heaviest sentence she could allow to proceed from the amiable little claret-coloured gentlemen upon the bench. The evening wore on lonely. Outside her windows lay the winter night, held by cold, motionless and utterly quiet. A tinkle of falling cinders was the only sound she had for company; and it was odd to think that not so very far away, half an hour's flight of a crow across the hills, was the noisy coffee-room of the Lion and Circlet and the crowded living hush of the attentive court.

Hour after hour she sat, listlessly, in peace, awaiting her father's return. The fire sank. Cold crept about her in the room. Too inert to move, she pressed her shoulders deep into a cushion, and huddling within the sheltering wings of the chair, unexpectedly fell asleep.

She woke to a room half dark, roused by the sound

of wheels. She listened. The wheels did not stop, and she knew that it was her father returning, since his habit was to drive straight to the stables and there dismount. The clock showed half-past two. She ran out into the hall, and finding candles set ready upon the table, lit both, her father's and her own. With one of these in her hand, sitting, expectant, upon a great oak chest, she waited for him to come from the kitchen passage, bringing news.

It was not long before she heard him coming; but how strangely, with a rising voice, and halts, and a stumbling drag of feet. She had forgotten that this might happen. The candle began to shake in her hand, and its flame to waver; she put it down on the chest. The advancing sounds were at the door which separated hall from lobby. She heard the handle clumsily turned back and forth; then some sudden pressure flung the door open, and she saw in the opening two men standing: her father and the groom, John.

They seemed to wrestle together. Forster held his arm about the man's shoulder, head hanging, feet dragging, muttering into his own breast. John, blinking at the light, saw Melian at once, seated there in her white dress between the two lights. He gave a heave and a snatch at his burden, to get his master standing, with a better show, and said breathlessly:

"Getting the master up to bed, miss. Had a queer turn, like." Then, to Forster, straining and slaving: "All right now, sir. You're home."

But Melian was not to mistake the cause of her father's indignity a second time. She answered in the low voice that the secret hour demanded, but hard with disgust:

"Can you manage alone?"

The man did not answer, for as she spoke Forster slipped from his grasp and fell sideways, helplessly, to the floor. John quickly stooped, and with a hand hooked in each armpit, began to drag the senseless weight towards the stairs. The sight of her father's trailing legs and silly hands that slithered and picked at the floor as he was pulled across it sickened Melian. She called to the panting man:

"Wait, I'll help you."

"You miss?" John answered, looking at her with pity. "He's not right for you to handle. Best let me call Walter."

And laying Forster down, his head supported against the first step, he made as if to run upstairs.

"No!" Melian cried out, shamed that another servant should see her father; but John hardly stayed.

"Best let me go for him," he repeated, and went lightly up the stairs, turning off through the door on the right that led to the servants' quarters. Melian, once more the woman put in her place, went slowly back to the chest on which stood the candles, their flames rigid as metal in the tranquil cold. She took up one and retraced the hall, meaning to go out of the way, and let the two men deal with their master; only thus could she meet them next day without embarrassment, issue her trivial orders, and be obeyed.

Her father's body lay across the foot of the stairs, propped against the newel-post, one arm outstretched along the bottom tread. His fall had silenced but in no way sobered him. He still weaved his head to and fro, and twitched his fingers. She hesitated as she ap-

proached, lifting her skirt a little, to step past him. Without warning he raised his eyes and pronounced distinctly, twice, the one word:

"Hanged; hanged," said Horatio Forster, "both of 'em." He seemed to consider, and to address without recognising his daughter. "Dancing on Monday, both of 'em. Good sport."

She could not get by. She forced herself to speak.

"Which men, which two?"

"Frank," said he, with difficulty moving his tongue round the word. His success pleased him, and he repeated the feat. "Frank, Frank——"

"What?" she asked sharply. "Who do you say?"

"Frank," he repeated, chuckling, "Frank——"

She stood back from him for a moment in horror, then seized his shoulder and fairly shook him. The heavy head swung with her vigorous pulling, forward and back, sideways and back.

"Answer me," she commanded him loudly, in her impatience and fear forgetful of the sleeping house. "Is Frank condemned? You told me he was safe."

"Death," he answered softly, as though it was some secret and delightful word, "taken back whence he came and hanged by the neck. By the neck——"

He put a hand to his own neckcloth, writhing his neck about. His fingers caught in the folds of linen, twisted, pulled them like a tourniquet, tighter. His eyes livened to a horrible fear, a croaking whisper came from his throat. She plucked the hand away; it fell like a dead thing thudding from step to floor. He swallowed noisily and murmured, while she repeated:

"You told me he was safe. You swore he was safe."

He did not answer, but went on trying over and over again some word whose difficulty was a challenge. Helplessly, in rage, she stamped her foot.

"Answer me," said Melian, "why is he condemned? Was it Sir Hilary?"

At this his mumbling ceased; the one word focused what was left of his wits, and he met her eyes unblinking.

"But I'll break him," mumbled Forster; and immediately, clamouring to a shout, "I'll break him, shoot him, break him——"

Anger was lost, then, in a flurry and babble of uncomprehended words, a riot of noise that almost covered the sound of the menservants' advancing. They ran down, hearing the rant of it, to Melian's rescue, neat John, and Walter barefooted; and in a moment had jerked Forster to his feet between them. As they held him thus, before beginning their frog's march up the stairs, Melian appealed to John.

"Is it true, then? Frank?"

"Guilty," John answered; an unexpected movement from Forster brought the word out loudly, almost on a shout. She asked again:

"To die?"

"Sentence to-morrow," he answered; then, with a glance at the imperturbable clock-face, "to-day."

She gestured to them to go on, and as they began to jockey her father upstairs, called, under her voice: "Say nothing, yet."

To Alice, she meant. John nodded over her father's head, and they began to ascend, step by step. She followed with the pair of candles, and so lighted the infamous progress as far as Forster's door; where, with-

out another word offered or answered, she left the men to get him to bed as they could.

III

Her father did not come to breakfast. She sat alone, taking a little food lest the servants should notice something out of the way; for the obligation of the mask, which is upon servants, is upon mistresses too. The meal done, dreading to meet her father, lest the dregs of last night's madness should still be in him, she put on her strong shoes, and set out, walking along lanes ribbed with mud that had stiffened in the cold, persistent wind. She had need of a quiet hour, troubled as she was with the recollection of her father, and the news that Alice must be told. This last obsessed her to the obscuring of the rest. She walked unseeing between the slopes, under naked boughs. Gone were the draped willows, the skirted elms, that in summer cooled with their shade the roads and waters winding among hills. As she walked, intent, the wind pressing her shoulders strongly, she forgot distance, cold, fatigue, in contemplation of the deadly hurt that she must give.

At High Barley, not caring to pass through the village, she turned again towards home. A quarter of a mile later, the sound of hoofs overtook her. She drew aside to let the rider pass; instead, there was an exclamation, the horse was pulled to a walk and a man sprang down. Incredulously, her quick glance recognised his descending boot, before he uncovered and spoke.

"Mademoiselle," said De Lannion, "I am on the way to you."

"To me?"

She could find nothing more to say. Her cheeks, wind-

flushed already, could not acknowledge him. She repeated:

“On your way to me?”

“Yes, with a message.”

She stopped. He brought his horse to a standstill with a hand upon the bit.

“From whom?”

He took from an inner pocket a letter which he held out. She asked, not touching it:

“What is it? From whom?”

“From Sir Hilary,” he answered, holding it towards her. She accepted it, opened, and soon read it, while the horse tossed his head and sidled, until harshly commanded in French to be quiet. At last, showing him the enclosure, and card, she said:

“An invitation to Monday’s ball at Mawdry. The card, you see; and then, the note in his hand reminding me——” She broke off. “Why does he write? He knows I cannot come.”

De Lannion met her eyes squarely.

“Why cannot you?”

“My father——” she broke out, “he hates Sir Hilary. Could you not see it, there in the inn at Pliny? He hates him madly. He would injure him. There was a reason at first——”

She stumbled; but he took her out of the difficulty by saying directly:

“Mrs. Dest; she told me. But, excuse me, you say it is hatred because of that?”

“That; there have been other things since. This trial—Sir Hilary has beaten him there, too.”

“But the men to be hanged,” said he, puzzled, “they were not your father’s servants?”

"His protégés," she answered with a half-tone of apology for her use of his language. "My father paid counsel for them, worked, brought witnesses to save them. Sir Hilary points a finger, and they are to die."

"So it is like that," said he, slowly considering the situation. "But of all this, Sir Hilary knows nothing. He spoke of your father to me; asking his name; he could not remember him, that night at the inn. He liked you, thought you charming. He knows nothing of this quarrel."

She touched the card.

"He cannot, or he would not send this. How can I answer? I dare not bring this to the house."

"I will charge myself with your answer," said he, "you need not write. I will tell him myself what you say."

She had a moment for thinking; and, strangely, that which came to the surface of her mind was that the card she held in her hand gave permission to see again the man beside her; to refuse even the chance of that gave her pain. Yet she must refuse. Having determined, the resolve was followed by a gust of ill-will against her father's tyrannous devisings.

"Say to Sir Hilary," said she, "that I deeply regret it is not in my power to fulfil the promise I made——"

"Yes?" he nodded, as she paused.

"And that—I had best put in plainly—it is not my father's wish that I should accept. I am very sorry, but I cannot come."

"Your father's wish—not yours?"

"Not mine."

The word came softly out. She was embarrassed by the sound of her voice, and said hastily:

"Let us walk on."

"You are cold," said he, with a glance very different from Mr. Galliard's silly solitudes; and when, for excuse, she answered that she was a little chilled, in an instant he had his coat off and about her shoulders. She could not reject the happiness and the trembling that it laid upon her. It held his warmth. She made no protest, but thanked him simply, walking on. He spoke:

"Then you shall never come to Mawdry?"

"While my father lives, I fear not."

"And I am not to see you."

She answered, tenderness and anger possessing her:

"While I am in my father's house I must respect his wishes—" anger broke through—"though him I cannot respect."

He looked quickly at her.

"I saw him last night, in Pliny. He was——" a lift of the shoulders. "He came home, then?"

"Yes."

She said no more, but held the arms of the coat more closely over her breast.

De Lannion saw the movement, and it gave him courage to say:

"You ought not to be there with him, in that house."

"Where else?" she asked, bitterness overwhelming her. "Is not her father's house a woman's rightful place?"

He heard the pain, and cried out, flinging his arms wide:

"If I were not a prisoner, I could answer you! If I had even my sword—but without liberty, without a sou in my pocket, what shall I say? What should I dare to offer?"

She could not answer. After a moment he went on:

"It is as well, perhaps, that I do not see you again. I am too old." Then, quickly: "Not too old to be hurt, I do not mean that. But old enough to tell myself that the hurt will not last."

She felt an unreasoning jealous pang at that, and spoke in haste.

"You have been hurt, then, as you call it, often?"

"Often," he answered gravely, "but so deep as this, never."

They walked in silence for a few yards, she looking down, he considering her with a kind of tender amazement. He spoke:

"Is it not a strange thing? I have only spoken with you three times; seen you once more than that. And yet, see how it is between us, though we have not even the same tongue."

"You talk as if you knew——" she began, but could not carry the phrase to its end.

"I do know," he answered; and looked where she held the coat close to her breast.

She halted, imploring him with her eyes.

"Turn back here, and leave me. Take your coat, and leave me."

"You will be cold," he answered, meeting her eyes. She cried out passionately, wrought out of all restraint by the events crowding upon her:

"What use is it to have your coat——" she swallowed; but, sure of him, went gallantly on—"if my heart is to be cold?"

"You say it," said he, slowly, wonderingly, gathering her hands, "you say it plainly. That is not like other women. You are brave."

Again the pang, with those words, "other women," and with the praise, a glow. Quickly he kissed the hands. Gloved though they were, she could feel the warmth of his mouth, and the harshness of the beard. Before she could make the instinctive movement to caress his bent head, he put her hands from him, and holding their wrists closely, said:

"So this is not the last time."

"My father——" she began, piteously. "I cannot come to Mawdry, you must understand it."

"Mawdry, no," said he, "I do not speak of that. But here: or where you please. You must promise me."

"I do promise," she answered, strongly.

"When? To-morrow?"

"At this hour. Here."

"*Quand-même!*" said he; and repeated in her own language, with a closer clasp, "Come what may!"

"Come what may! No further. It is not safe."

They had spoken, looking at each other's mouths. He dropped her hands, with a last swift kiss on them, and turned to mount.

"Your coat!" she cried, and took it from her shoulders with a reluctance that owed nothing to the encroaching cold. He hesitated, then took it, and buttoned it close, as though to keep the warmth of her about him. They were at a cross-roads. Mawdry, said one of the arms; Dancing Corner, said that which pointed east. He took no further leave; only, looking down from the saddle as he swung his horse about, said:

"To-morrow."

He was off at a canter; soon the hedges hid him. Melian stood for a while, not looking after him, living

within herself as fiercely as though she burned. A tiny shock brought the world back to her, the palm of the hand he had kissed pressing against her own lips.

IV

Her father, she learned, returning, had gone again into Pliny; might sleep there; she was not to wait meals. The relief, that she need not see him, was very great. Even the thought of Alice was light compared with her fear of that meeting. The day passed and seemed long. Sitting alone, trying to finish her netting, her eyes would droop, weighted by the wish to revisit the scene in the lane. She went through it word by word, movement by movement, until the weight upon her eyes grew intolerable. It was as if she could never again lift them upon ordinary things and people, without that swimming, that desire to close and be away to the sweetness within her. She heard the clock strike, and obeyed slowly its summons to leave the fire. Never had reality taken on such poignancy; never had the throwing back of morning shutters roused her from such deep dreaming as was broken by this evening bell.

V

It was Alice's duty to call Melian at eight o'clock; but Melian, next day, of her own accord woke early, troubled by the knowledge that she had given a false hope, and must destroy it. In the chill darkness this dread overcame the happy memories in which she would have wrapped herself. It became urgent, tormenting; and when, at half-past five, she heard in the room below stairs somebody astir, she could almost

bless the opportunity, the escape into reality from the tyranny of the unreal.

Melian slipped from her bed before the irresolution of fear could seize her fully, and huddling on her gown, went down towards the sounds that told of Alice awake. She opened the door, and peered into her drawing-room. It was topsy-turvy, chairs pushed and piled towards the centre, covered with the dust-sheet on which Mrs. Montfort's training insisted. By the fireplace Alice knelt, a handkerchief about her hair, cleaning out the grate, and humming at secular speed some hymn. Seeing her there, the outward curve of her body very visible in that attitude, Melian remembered her condition and the traditional effects of shock upon it; then, as swiftly recollecting that somehow, soon or late, the news must come, she entered, closing the door behind her. So intent was Alice, so happily preoccupied, that she did not hear the sound of the latch, but went on raking out cinders, which came clinking down in elfin accompaniment to her song. Despite Melian's resolve to be calm, her voice would not obey, and there was a tremor even in her speaking of the girl's name.

"Alice!"

The girl started away from the grate as though her fingers had closed upon a red-hot coal, and instantly knowing with an animal's instinct that something was unbearably wrong, asked nothing, but waited, wide-eyed, facing the white figure leaning by the door.

"Alice," Melian said again, with an effort so great that the words came separately and slowly, "I've come to tell you—it is better that you should know——"

The girl could not help her out. That silence held her through which she had only broken twice in her

life. She was dumb once more before the old apprehension of pain. Melian saw that there was no way to tell her message kindly; it was a death-wound, however delivered. She said, therefore, in a voice that sounded clearly through the expectant room:

"I told you that Frank was safe. But my father says it is too soon to be sure. You must be ready to be brave——"

The girl dropped her eyes; Melian went on, more easily for that:

"Alice, I was mistaken; but it was not my fault. They told me, both of them, that he was safe. I wanted to comfort you, I was so glad to say it——" Her voice failed, clicked back in her throat. Alice rose clumsily from her knees, and smoothed her apron with what seemed an unconscious gesture of the hands. Such silence alarmed Melian, lest a harmful fury might follow. She did not anticipate the words that came.

"Thank you, miss," said Alice; and taking the handkerchief from her head she folded it neatly, and stowed it away in her pocket. Melian could not watch that stricken quiet. She went hurrying on:

"We know nothing yet. The judges gave sentence yesterday. If—if it should be so, my father will find some way for you to visit the prison. You would like that, Alice? And, you know, you must not be afraid; you must not be afraid that we will turn you away. You must be brave, and good. It is not only for yourself—you must be useful and good for the sake of the child——"

Alice answered, very quietly:

"I won't wait for that."

"What do you mean?"

Alice did not answer the question; and Melian, with an awkward girlish movement, turned and went away to her bed again, that now was cold.

VI

It was past mid-day before her father came home. She heard the sound of wheels, and running to the window, read her news upon his face. Frank's death was written in the knotted brows, the protruding lip, the cruel lash that, unlike his careful ordinary coachmanship, took the horse upon the shoulder when it would have stopped by the door. She went back to the fire, praying that he might not come to speak with her; and by and by Walter arrived with a message, that the master was busy and would keep his room. She asked Walter for confirmation of her guess, and received it. Frank was to die.

"The master takes it to heart, miss," said the man, as though astonished by such a display of humanity.

"It is dreadful news," said Melian, absently, pre-occupied with the thought of Alice. She bade him not tell the girl but send her at once to the drawing-room. It was two o'clock, bare time to get the horror told and over before she must encounter her own lover, walk out towards joy. The irony of it came upon her fully, and with it her first taste of the selfishness of love. For how could she care if a man died and a woman wept, since the man was not hers, nor the grief; and when the hour towards which her heart beat was no more than one round of the clock's long hand away?

Walter departed on his errand; once more she sat alone. Waiting, she heard once more, unbelievably, wheels on the gravel, and went to the window with

a mad hope, perhaps, that it might be De Lannion come; whence she saw with astonishment her uncle, shakily descending from the rectory chaise. The bell of the front door rang. Walter, despatched elsewhere, was long in answering. Melian ran to it herself, to welcome the old man in out of the cold. His first words amazed her.

"My poor child," said Mr. Montfort, "I am come to take you away."

She recoiled. Walter appeared at this moment, and bidding him let Alice wait, she pulled her uncle by the arm into the drawing-room.

"What is it?" she asked, in fear.

Slowly unwinding his woollen comforter, pulling the gloves from his numbed fingers, he answered:

"We will not go into reasons. I speak first with your father; afterwards, you must come away from this place."

More astonished than ever at the firmness of her uncle's tone she asked again:

"What is it? Do you need me? Is my aunt ill?"

"No, no," said he, "I have no need to tell you what the matter is, Melian. Do not mock your own conscience by asking. I cannot leave you to your father's influence, when I see what has been done already. In four months, Melian. Four months!"

She had an unreasoning fear lest her talk in the lane might have become known to him; before she could argue this away he spoke again.

"Where is your father?"

"Just back, this half-hour, from Pliny. Not to be disturbed."

"I wish he need not be," said Mr. Montfort ruefully.

"I do wish it from my heart. But as a Christian I must speak. He will overpower me, he is so very strong-spoken. I have this advantage, that I know him to be wicked, and that," said Mr. Montfort as though to comfort himself, "should be to me as a shield and buckler."

She understood, now, why he had come. The next words made it plain.

"I have spoken, only this morning, to Mr. Finn. He rode out, very kindly, so soon as the verdict was known, to acquaint me with it. Melian, he gave me some account of your evidence; praising you, saying that you spoke up well. I questioned him, he gave what he assured me were your very words. Melian, I believed that you had at heart something of the fear of God. That failing, could not the fear of man restrain you?"

She began to mumble unconvincingly; he stopped her, pitying.

"Ah, do not," said he, gently, "do not still lie."

Her head drooped. Mr. Montfort put his thin hands upon the chair arms, and with an effort, the effort of an old man, pulled himself to his feet, and jerked the bell. She, too, rose.

"He will be angry," she said.

"I am afraid so," Mr. Montfort agreed. "I am afraid he will. But I cannot let this pass." He went on, musing, "God has found out my indolence in His service. I have given my hours to dead languages, dead men's words, instead of proclaiming the living truth. He puts this trial upon me. I must accept it, and endure to His honour."

The servant appeared. He spoke in another voice.

"I am to speak with Mr. Forster; it is urgent, tell him. Say that I can take no denial, that I must see him, whether it be later or now. Do you understand me? Then, pray give the message."

Behind her silence Melian's mind was tossing, devising. It wanted only half an hour of the time at which she was to meet De Lannion upon the road. A way must be found. Aloud, she said to her uncle:

"Will you not go to his room? He will see you there."

Mr. Montfort answered, not budging:

"You must be present."

"Why must I?"

Her tone was rebellious, and a mild surprise came upon his face as he heard.

"It is needful that you should know what he has done. I believe you to be loyal. What you did was done, perhaps, for an end which seemed good, no doubt your father assured you so. And in the matter of the affidavit I believe you to be guiltless."

"The affidavit?"

Her words held a real astonishment. He answered quietly:

"In good time," and closed his eyes. It was the look he wore before his sermon, when the text had been given out, and he prayed for light to expound its subtleties fully to the ploughboys and tired women of his congregation.

They remained thus for some minutes, he with lowered eyelids, she with her gaze wretchedly fixed upon the hurrying clock. She meditated evasion. She was torn with the need to see her lover, and the shame of failing at the rendezvous she had vowed to keep. The maddest alternatives drove through her mind; as she

weighed them, there was a wrench at the handle of the door. Her father entered, and stood lowering.

"Well, Simon," said he, and she heard with horror the wine already in his voice, "who the hell sends you, and why the hell do you send for me?"

Mr. Montfort, clasping his hands loosely before him, head erect, answered:

"I have come to take Melian away."

Forster laughed, and gave his daughter an ugly look.

"What," he said, "have you been at your letter-writing again? Out of the frying-pan, and now you'd go back to it. I thought you had more spunk."

"Talk to me, Horatio," said Mr. Montfort, "not to the child. This is a matter between men."

"Between men!" Forster repeated, eyeing his brother-in-law from head to foot. "Whence do you get that title? Not from your breeches, for Julia wears them."

"Horatio," said Mr. Montfort in his clear, soft sermon voice, "why did you set your name and mine to a lie?"

Forster took in a long breath.

"Oho!" said he, "you are there, are you? News runs fast in these solitudes. Well, and if I did?"

Mr. Montfort turned to Melian.

"He admits it, my dear, you see. You understand now, do you not?"

"No," said she sullenly, time racing on. "If it is something my father has done, I will believe it, if it is bad enough."

Again came her father's sodden laugh.

"I said you were a missish sort of fool. I knew you were no stayer——"

Mr. Montfort's gesture checked him. Kindly taking Melian's hand, her uncle went on:

"Your father has betrayed a trust. I say nothing of his own honour——"

"Honour! I am a tradesman; greatcoats are my trade, not coats of arms. I have nothing to do with this tripe of honour and birth."

"You were made a magistrate to assist the law. You have used your powers to deceive and resist the law. How my words were ingeniously altered, I cannot tell——"

"Easy enough. I left the last page untouched, with the signatures. The other pages were in my hand; I rewrote them to my own liking. Do you call that ingenuity?"

"Fortunately," Mr. Montfort went steadily on, "through the word of a friend, your treachery was discovered in time. I can make it known to the judge how they have been tricked——"

"And what good will you do?" Forster scornfully asked. "Make a perjurer of me, have the girl up in the dock—a pretty family scene. What good will you do? The lie was to save that man, your servant. Well, he is to hang. Sir Hilary Pomfret says so. Take away my evidence, still he will hang. What good has all my swearing done? What good will you do?"

"The ends of justice——" Mr. Montfort murmured in perplexity.

"The ends of justice! They are served when Sir Hilary Pomfret is satisfied," Forster returned, with a sudden blow of his clenched hand upon the mantelpiece. "Do not waste your time making a felon of me. Go to Mawdry, and try for a chance to lick your pa-

tron's boots; you will do better. The King's writ does not run here. The judges are this man's creatures. I have seen them, with their wigs off, taking wine with him. Judges, landowners, they all cringe. And to what, my God? To a name done up in a coat not paid for. A worthless mind in a rotten body, for he'll lie anywhere, with any whore——"

"Be silent!" Mr. Montfort cried, and caught his arm in a frail grip, weakly shaking it. "You are mad, to speak so before the child."

"She has learned a thing or two since she came here," Forster answered, still a little breathless from the expending of his fury. Mr. Montfort said, holding his arm to Melian:

"Go, my dear. Get your things together. Do not delay, the day draws in."

"How?" said Forster. "What elopement's this?"

"I am come to take Melian back with me to Thrope," Mr. Montfort answered. "It is not fitting that she should remain here."

Forster threw off the light hand upon his arm, and came striding to Melian.

"So you're going?"

The clock had long since met and passed her hour. In the full flood of her disappointment she answered him.

"Thank God, I am."

He stepped back. The movement disturbed his precarious balance and he swayed sideways to a chair.

"Why should I stay?" she went on, "to be frightened, and driven, and to see hideous things?"

"What—what things?" he asked; as though, his frenzy done, he was getting into a stupor of wine.

"Yourself," she answered savagely. "You, drunken

and sick upon the stairs; shouting, the servants holding you—ah!”

It was an exclamation of utter disgust, given with a shake of the head, a wry mouth, as though the very scene were before her. Her uncle said once more:

“My dear, go put your things together. Do not be long.”

But Forster from his chair caught at her dress as she passed.

“Going, eh?” said he; and reaching up his other hand to her shoulders pulled himself upright by her, and so stood. “Going, Melian?”

She did not answer. He shook her a little.

“Do you remember a talk we had, in that dingy room over there——” He nodded towards Thrope. “Have you forgotten that so soon?”

She made a movement to escape. His grip tightened, and she stood still, only turning her face away, not to have his breath upon it.

“That kind of compact we made, to make a new start, to try together—father and daughter pulling together, double harness; that was the sense of it. What becomes of that? You agreed. You wrote to me. What becomes of the promise?”

“I did not promise a drunkard and a madman,” said she, very low.

“A madman?” he echoed, stupidly.

“What else?” she answered, turning her eyes full towards him at last. “You, with your hatred of Sir Hilary, your contriving against him, plots and plans—and he does not even know it, does not know who you are! He did not remember, that night in Pliny, who you were! He laughs at you.”

"Who told you that?" said he, the grip tightening to an agony. "Who have you been seeing? Galliard? That French mongrel?"

"You hurt me, you hurt——" she cried out, writhing. The fingers sank deeper.

"Who have you talked with? Who have you seen, you bitch?"

A hurried rapping came at the door. Forster shouted towards it.

"Who's there? Keep away!" Then, to Melian, "Answer me, or I'll take my crop to you. Who's been talking——"

The rapping was repeated, but this time waited for no answer. The door opened, Walter broke into the room, white-faced, staring.

"She's dead, miss," he called to Melian, standing with closed eyes under the agony of her father's hand, "dead—hanged! We found her in the cupboard."

The grip slackened. Melian, clutching her shoulder where the pain had been, breathed:

"Alice?"

And with the word heard a confusion of noise in her ears, saw the candles lengthen to swords, the room close in upon her, the floor rush upwards. Softly as a loosened dress she fell, and lay.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

T H R O P E

I

IT IS to be hoped," said Mrs. Montfort, pouring tea, "that now, your father's crooked ways having been made clear to you, and the rough places plain, you will cease to hanker after excitement and wordliness."

The urn reflected, with faithful unction, her Christian morning smile. Melian, pale from a night of weeping, made no answer. Her aunt resumed:

"You will now be willing to admit the justice of that attitude which I have constantly maintained. Your father is no suitable companion for a young woman, or, indeed, for a woman of any age. It was always so, and he disimproves with the years. I am at a loss to comprehend how a man can be prudent in business affairs and so disastrously rash in the conduct of his own life. A magistrate, lending his countenance to crime! His lack of scruple appals me; and when I consider that his duplicity did not even serve its appointed purpose, I am bereft of words."

But Melian would afford no sport, would not strike back, merely sat crumbling her breakfast toast. Her uncle, to divert the attack, made a sortie.

"That is an old tale, my love," said he, "you scold me, very rightly, when I harp on old tales. Do not imitate that which you reprove."

"Certain things are salutary to be remembered,"

his wife responded, after one gaze of surprise in his direction, "and we should receive and retain them for purposes of chastening. Moreover, the passing of some twenty hours does not make an old tale of a recent event. Such happenings as those at the Toll House remain for a warning; and I am glad to apprehend, by Melian's tears, that she is in a state to derive profit from them."

For Mrs. Montfort, though slow of speech, was a quick observer, and Melian's gesture, to take the welling tears upon her fingers, had not escaped her.

Mr. Montfort saw it, too, and came on gallantly.

"You distress her, Julia," said he. "You do not realise, my love, how very striking and disturbing it may be to take part in such events as those to which you refer."

"And if I do not," replied his wife tartly, "whose fault is it? You set out without warning yesterday, while I was absent in the village, and without warning return, close upon the midnight hour. My natural anxiety you disregard——"

"Julia, my love," Mr. Montfort protested, "I left word——"

"Word! It was that, and no more—the scantiest of notes. My natural wish to inquire into your motives and conduct on your return, you set aside on the plea of fatigue. My concern has been fobbed off; none other than that vulgar expression will serve. My confidence has been unsought, my constitutional mildness mocked. I have more to say; but since the day is one that exhorts to mortification, I will defer it."

"My dear," said Mr. Montfort, the fight ebbing out of him, "you remind me, very timely, that to-day is

the Sabbath. There are one or two points—yes, one or two small matters—I take my leave, therefore, until after the service. As to Melian,” he paused by her chair, and did his timid best for her, “she has been greatly troubled of late, overpowered indeed. She should not, I think, be exposed to any further excitements. Let her keep at home this morning; attendance at church may be dangerous in her nervous state. And do not, if you can humanly avoid it, plague her with questions.”

He drifted away, on the momentary calm produced by his mild defiance. Mrs. Montfort, looking closely at Melian, could perceive that she was, certainly, very much shaken; but though observant, she could refrain from drawing conclusions when these were inconvenient. She chose, therefore, to put another construction upon the silence and pathos of her niece.

“I do not wonder, my dear child, at your condition,” said she, the sympathy in her voice a mask for determination. “It was all very shocking indeed! Your father’s infamous juggling with the sanctities of the law; his intemperate conduct; and then, that misguided girl——” She clicked her tongue in horror. “And what of this other rumour, imparted to me by Mr. Finn, who had it, no doubt, from his nephew: that your father has chosen, for reasons unknown, but which cannot be sufficient, to quarrel publicly with Sir Hilary Pomfret? Is this the case? Has he indeed been so mad?”

“It is true,” Melian answered dully.

“Your uncle’s patron! I cannot readily conceive such a thing of any individual in his right mind.”

“He is not, I think,” said Melian; then, with a rush, “Aunt Julia, it has been difficult for me. Do not speak of all this until I am more at ease.”

"I do not question you," returned Mrs. Montfort, with dignified reproach. "I have, I believe, many failings; but among them, impertinent curiosity cannot, I thank Heaven, be numbered. I confront the unhappy incidents of yesterday with all the innate repugnance of the unsullied female mind. Instinct bids me aver my thoughts; concern, both for my brother and my niece, bids me inquire into the circumstances which so deeply involve them. It is my duty to inquire, and my duty I will perform, come what may."

Melian rose, and made for the door, stricken again by those last words. Come what may! But what had come was beyond all foreseeing, dreadful beyond all happy calculation. She had wept long that night, not for her father, sullenly drinking his rage and vengeance to a head, not for that poor girl, emulating the last extremity of her lover; but because a promise had, against her will, been broken, to spend half an hour talking in a country lane.

When, after her fit of fainting, she came back to the things of sense, it had been to find her uncle sitting by her, while outside the door men whispered, women sobbed. He had her pelisse ready, and her muff, and when she said she could walk, and made, uncertainly, for the door to the hall, he checked her steps and led her away through a side-door into the garden, and so to the chaise. She said nothing, but she understood well enough that the body of Alice lay in the hall as it had been cut down, the neck still swollen from the cord. Of her father, there was no sign. She did not ask for him. She did not pity Alice. There was room in her heart for one thought only, that she had missed her lover, and he might think her faithless.

Now, at the words that evoked him, she put her hands once more to her eyes, knuckling them like a child, for bitterness. Mrs. Montfort, coming to her with massive kindness, offered an interpretation of her woe.

"It is not surprising," said she, "that you find yourself overwrought. For a girl to lose in one afternoon her respect for her father and an excellent servant, is indeed a severe trial of complacency. You should not cry, my dear, for—although at the moment you set no value on it—your appearance will suffer with your sensibility. Dry your eyes. I wish that I could offer you some project of distraction——"

Melian shook her head, murmuring something about kindness, and a headache.

"There is the great ball at Mawdry to-morrow," her aunt continued, "the very opportunity I should have chosen for you to make your bow to the great world; better than all the law-courts and inns which appear to represent the best your father can do for you. But thanks to his folly, there can be no question of that."

"Do you go," Melian asked, eagerly turning her tear-stained face, "you and my uncle?"

"Naturally we go," returned Mrs. Montfort, pleased that her niece should display unexpected interest in balls, "the incumbent of Thrope! But though that position confers many privileges, I fear," said Mrs. Montfort reluctantly, "I fear that it does not include the augmentation of Sir Hilary's guests without his leave. True consequence does not presume——"

"But I am invited!" Melian cried, the change in her demeanour so great, so entirely removed from the very suitable desolation she had previously displayed, that her aunt was almost startled.

"How can that be?" inquired Mrs. Montfort, distrustfully. "Your father's quarrel——"

"Sir Hilary bears no ill-will," Melian interrupted. "He spoke with me in Pliny. He made me promise that I would come, and afterwards he sent me a card, with a note in his own hand. I have it with me."

For she had thrust it into the bosom of her dress as she turned home from that meeting only because her lover's hand had touched it. That night, after all the strange hours had been lived, it had fallen to the floor of her old bedroom at Thrope.

"Indeed!" said her aunt, her smile expanding, her whole person raying out a majestic pleasure. "But you tell me nothing new when you afford the information that Sir Hilary is magnanimous. Is it so, indeed? You have your card? Then, my dear niece, I cannot advise you to do other than accept, and thankfully come. It is a genteel distraction—more, it is a duty. A young girl must bow to society, and you may take this opportunity of dissociating yourself from your father's wrong-headedness and yet greater wrong-doing."

The smile became luscious, with a deepening of the lips; they could not widen.

"And so Sir Hilary spoke with you in Pliny! Ah, but you tended him in the first hours of weakness. Still, it is very pretty of him to remember. A note in his own hand! You shall show it to me, when the first obligation of the day is performed. Sir Hilary is a bachelor, so that we may be assured his hospitality will be lavish; yet since he is so well-born, we know that it will not be excessive. So ancient and respected a family! I see that your tears are quite at an end."

They were; and Melian had much ado not to let the

change in her aspect show too plainly. But her aunt was so swept away by the prospect of presenting her niece to an unmarried Sir Hilary, a Sir Hilary already obliged and grateful, that she did not notice the change. She went on:

“But for all that, your eyes are still heavy. Your spirits and complexion have been put to great straits in these last days. We must not presume upon endurance too far. I do not know that I am justified in allowing you to emerge to-day, even for the purpose of worship. Indeed, I remember now, your uncle was much against it. The wind is sleety; ‘a nipping and an eager air,’ as the great bard describes it. You must rest, if you are to be in looks to-morrow. I believe, Melian, though your inclination must be against me, that this morning you had better stay at home.”

Melian thanked her, looking as much in need of rest as she could. Mrs. Montfort came with her to the door, shepherded her to the sitting-room, where a fire, frugally lit only when breakfast was declared to be ended, was sending up thin listless tendrils of red flame. Melian was installed by it, in a chair not too conducive to idle repose; her aunt, sharply looking down, caught the gleam of a smile.

“For all that,” said Mrs. Montfort, with a return to her more usual manner, “it will not do to spend a secular morning. Sermons in stones are very well, but they are, fortunately, to be found in books also.”

She took up an oldish brown volume that lay upon her secretary, and holding it gingerly, since to her knowledge dust had lain upon it as recently as two days ago, put it into the girl’s hand.

“You may,” said she, “profitably peruse this, which

I came upon when investigating your uncle's hoarded volumes. It has more value than most of them; and while the author lacks the sublimity of Blair—certain comparisons, too, appear frivolous and misplaced—he enjoyed, I believe, the distinction of pronouncing these discourses from the pulpit of St. Paul's. The bell calls me. Rest, my love, and read. And when I return, do not fail to show me Sir Hilary's note."

She went from the room with a proud hissing of Sunday petticoats; and soon, after due preparation, and preceded by servants, set forth from the house. Melian, taking another chair, for want of better occupation, lazily opened the book. A paragraph very unlike the ordinary run of sermons took her eye.

"—in which words is expressed all that belongs to love, which is, to desire, and to enjoy; for to desire without fruition is a rage, and to enjoy without desire is a stupidity. In the first alone we think of nothing but that which we would have; and in the second alone, we care not for that, when we have it. In the first, we are without it; in the second, we were as good, for we have no pleasure in it. Nothing, then, can give us satisfaction, but when these two confer, *amare et frui*, to love and to enjoy——"

II

In the languor to which that strange sermon brought her, dreamily the morning went by; and when at half-past twelve a great bustling and stir gave warning of the arrival of the churchgoers, Melian had some ado to give her eyes the sober look appropriate to Sunday reading, as they entered, chafing their hands and exclaiming against the cold. She was, however, able to

inquire of her uncle what the text of his sermon had been.

"From the Psalms," he replied. "I fear the people hereabouts are a trifle inclined still to superstition, and to sympathy with that unfortunate man. There is a leaven of violence among them still, I find; and my sermon to-day was chosen to reprove it. Yes, from the Psalms; those words of the King and Singer, 'He sitteth in the lurking places of the villages; in the secret places doth he slay the innocent.' I believe, without vanity, that it may have an effect."

"The effect," said his wife sharply, "would have been a great deal more certain had you devoted less time to a discussion of the secret places. What can it matter to cottagers whether Danbury mound be a relic of Danes, or a trophy of Imperial Rome?"

"What matter?" Mr. Montfort repeated, stung. "It is of importance that this Roman theory should gain no ground. It is demonstrably false, as I think I have shown. I flatter myself that not one of my hearers to-day can continue in that illusion."

"To my mind," said his wife, "you make a mountain of a molehill."

"If I do," he replied defiantly, "it is because to the antiquary's eye the latter may outweigh the former; for we may attribute with some certainty the erection of a mountain to God's hand, while a mound such as Danbury is the evident work of His creatures. No, Julia; a people should know its own history as well as it can."

But Mrs. Montfort had been defied too often that morning. She came at him like a rushing wind.

"You had far better, Simon, have chosen your text

from Jeremiah—"I have seen thy abominations on the hills." I trust that I have never derogated from nor forsaken in any way the high standards of Christian womanhood; but there are times, Simon, there are seasons when I could find it in my heart to suppose St. Paul something less than inspired when he forbade the ministry to females. In your place, I should know my duty too well to pamper up parishioners with learning, in lieu of castigating them with rods."

He had no answer, and indeed may not have heard, being deep in Melian's book, which somehow had found its way to his hand. Mrs. Montfort, seeing him silent, was pleased to imagine that her reproof had struck home. She left her husband, and turned to her niece.

"Let us go upstairs, my dear. There is the letter we spoke of; and I require your considered opinion regarding my head-dress for the ball."

They went together, in the precarious amity of relatives newly met, towards the sewing-room, where, shrouded beneath old sheets, Mrs. Montfort's panoply was arrayed. Melian coming into the room, so entirely unchanged, could not but think of her father, and of the bargain they had made there, unfairly struck between a grown man who knew what he wanted and a child eager for escape. How should it hold? Who could reproach her that she had not kept to it? Her reason answered that no code could blame her. Her instinct said, that in forsaking him she was guilty, for instinct knew more of the facts of the case than did reason. Instinct—or conscience, let it be—knew that De Lannion was her very life, her happiness, her sane heart's choice; reason said, "This is a stranger." And for this stranger, for the mere chance of seeing him once more and touch-

ing hands, she had left her father in the hour of defeat, needing her; had betrayed him by flight.

"You observe," her aunt was saying, "that it is the very newest mode; or so the fashion-books of Mrs. Finn avouch."

She unveiled as she spoke, from its linen wrapping, a mound of spangled greenish gauze, a very Danbury of millinery, having a hollow beneath it to fit the head. Save its roundness, it possessed no other attribute of the eastern turban, no challenging aigrette, no jewelled plume. It was the turban of an English gentlewoman of strong principles, among which ranked high a vast contempt for all foreigners, and Turks in particular. She set it on with uncompromising firmness, and looked out from under its glittering folds at her niece.

"Some special effort," said she, "undoubtedly is Sir Hilary's due. Otherwise, as you, Melian, are well aware, no one is more averse than I from following the unseemly example set by Ahab's queen. But Mrs. Finn assures me, who through her nephew is in touch with London's fashions, that this is the very latest thing. One does not care to be thought countrified, and an entertainment at Mawdry obliges to extra pains. But I am not entirely satisfied. There is an effect of paucity and paltriness for which the pattern hardly prepared me."

She made a half-revolution, comparable to the ponderous swing of a library globe, turning from Africa to reveal the Americas. Melian, contemplating the wide back, the swathed head, forgot her own preoccupations in the joyous awe of assisting at a concession, on her aunt's part, to worldliness.

"I believe," said she, "it should not perch so high above your ears."

"Do you not think so?" inquired Mrs. Montfort almost humbly. "It is done with exact care from the pattern; no hasty approximation."

"The pattern, perhaps, was intended for a smaller head," Melian suggested.

Her aunt removed the turban with some little difficulty and setting it upon the table looked, but without great hope, to her niece for help. Melian pored over it, twisting it this way and that upon her hand; then suddenly took up a needle.

"To-day," Mrs. Montfort reluctantly reminded her, "is the Sabbath."

Melian put aside the irreligious needle, and took up a dozen pins instead. Mrs. Montfort eyed them; but while it was evident that sewing on Sunday should count as labour, she was uncertain into what category pinning on Sunday should fall. She sat silent, watching, as her niece teased and plumped out the folds.

"And in what, my dear child," she inquired after a pause, "shall you appear?"

"My father gave me a dress," Melian answered, busy with her pins.

"A suitable dress?" inquired her aunt, suspecting some undue gorgeousness. Melian described as well as she could the pink and silver, while pictures of her father came with painful reality before her mind. She lived again her first wearing of the dress, with her first understanding of how deeply that other treachery, that other flight had touched him; the talk in this room where she now sat, his hands clasped upon this very table, scored by the pattern-wheel; his words, offering, upon no compulsion, a partnership, which she of her free will had accepted. Those kinder aspects of him

imagination could readily summon. Reason, to bring back her indignation, her self-righteousness, must cry: he is a drunkard; he is drunk now, at this hour. She heard, and thought she hardened; but underneath, instinct still whispered: "You promised him, whom you leave for a stranger." She was torn with reproach, yet could not regret. She would go to Mawdry, take his enemy's hand, dance with whom she pleased, and put him quite away from her thoughts; all these things wisdom and commonsense seemed to approve. What shadow, then, murmured in her ear, "Beware?" She stifled a cry.

"I feared that you would prick yourself," came the voice of Mrs. Montfort. "Your fingers were never deft. Your handkerchief to your finger, I beg. We do not want blood upon the habiliments dedicated to joy."

CHAPTER TWELVE

MAWDRY

I

THE great ballrooms, that tall fluted pillars divided, were magnificent this evening in amber and cream. Towards the ceilings, four chandeliers took the eye, shivering, flashing, yet keeping their places, like icicles held frozen by enchantment, amid the warmth and stirring of the air. Down the centre of each room a set was ranged, long lines of ladies, each in a dress standing stiffly out about her feet, each with as many scollops, and embroideries, and fringes upon it as she could contrive; long lines of smiling, combed, and posturing gentlemen. Round the walls, ranged on comfortable stools, the matrons sat, following the progress of their charges up the set as they talked of fashions and likely marriages. Matrons were there in robes of every colour and style, in poplin and rep, in new dresses with barely a bodice, and old dresses smartened up for the evening by gauze scarves from London; all hopeful, and all a trifle hungry, as they watched the line of young men; allotting looks, and debts, and troublesome relatives, and incomes of a thousand a year to the best of their gossip and knowledge.

Among them, Mrs. Montfort, superb in her turban, made a very striking figure, hardly eclipsed by an old neighbouring lady, in a tall Patmos cap eight years out of date and a Chinese shawl embroidered with sprawling whiskered dragons, very similar in expression to

herself. The appearance of this lady deflected the course of conversation between Mrs. Montfort and Mrs. Finn, which had been concerned with the performances and complexions of Melian and Sabina, and permitted criticism, which had been lurking in ambush, to emerge unashamed.

"I do not know what you think, Mrs. Montfort," said Mrs. Finn, "but to my mind the occasion calls for something smarter than that cap, even if the diamonds are real ones."

"Certainly," Mrs. Montfort assented. "No woman of breeding, unless there were a defect to conceal, would bundle up her arms in those great puckered sleeves."

"No," said Mrs. Finn, putting up a plump hand to ease the tightness of her girdle under the armpits, "and I for one was glad when that fashion went out. One does not like to have a dress cut so very low upon the shoulders; it is tiresome indeed, for one is forever in dread of its dropping off altogether. There can be no peace of mind in such a dress."

At this juncture a gentleman, bowing, addressed the personage as Lady Slaughter; and the two critics, with a simultaneous click of the tongue, took themselves to task for having unwittingly found fault with the outer trappings of a marchioness. Their talk, after a moment's stricken pause, was resumed upon former lines.

"Sabina appears animated," said Mrs. Montfort. "She dances with energy."

"She is lucky, I tell her, to have her cousin always by," Mrs. Finn replied. Mrs. Montfort's expression inquired her meaning. "No, no," went on Mrs. Finn very honestly. "I do not mean that. I do not believe him to be in love. But he gives her no reason not to

hope, and so she takes pains. Look how she is bounding about. She will not do that once she has got him, if ever she does."

Mrs. Montfort, a little shocked by this plain speaking, sought out Melian in the crowd. She was at the far end of the room, standing opposite a man in some kind of uniform. Mrs. Finn touched Mrs. Montfort's arm with her fan at the very moment that the couple were perceived.

"Who is that gentleman, Melian's partner?" she inquired, with a spice of malice. "I did not see until now who she danced with. I thought it had been that one-armed major; but this has more the look of a nautical man."

"I do not see very well," replied Mrs. Montfort, who had the couple closely in view. "I cannot tell who it is."

"She seems vastly in love with him," went on Mrs. Finn. "I should not put up with that if I were you."

"In love!" repeated Mrs. Montfort, outraged.

"For I recognise him now," continued Mrs. Finn tranquilly, "and he is quite a pauper; a Frenchman that Sir Hilary keeps out of charity. My nephew tells me he is a tedious kind of a man, good for remarkably little, Jefferey says." Then, with a complacent eye upon Sabina and Mr. Galliard: "But then Jefferey will have a good fortune himself, and does not think much of those that are not so lucky."

Mrs. Montfort's forebodings were interrupted by the vision of a woman passing by upon the arm of a gentleman who constantly bent towards her. She had a lace handkerchief in her hand, with which, slowly waving it with an elegant turn of the wrist as she talked, she dispelled the heat that hundreds of candles imposed

upon the room. Among the stiffened shapeless dresses, hers was supple, of a kind of crimson silk called after one of Napoleon's victories. Her dark hair was not concealed under any cap, but dressed low, in a shining coil upon her neck like a sleeping snake. A demi-wreath of diamonds secured it, the classically parted leaves meeting in a peak above her forehead. The two ladies heard her voice as she halted beside them, awaiting passage through the dancers.

"There is a piquancy in it. I am glad Sir Hilary holds his ball upon the very night of the hangings. Some would have had him change it, but I said no; weakness to change. After all, are our conditions and theirs so very different? We dance upon wax, they upon air. They have the more poetic part, the *beau rôle*."

"You are stern," said the gentleman, in a low voice that caressed her. "Yet I'd be glad to have you for my judge."

"Shall I try you?" she asked, tilting her head towards him over the gleaming shoulder.

"I ask nothing more," he answered.

"Poor Sir Hilary!" said she, and laughed. "Is he to suffer, then, a second time?"

The crowd parted, the pair went by. The glances of both ladies followed, like Parthian darts.

"Who is that?" Mrs. Montfort inquired, with sinister emphasis.

"I can tell you," replied Mrs. Finn comfortably, "though I do not like to, for it is all so very shocking."

Which prelude drew the two heads together, nodding with confidence, recoiling in horror, and darting together again to be scandalised afresh. The tale of Mrs. Dest took some time to tell, but Mrs. Finn, well-

informed through Mr. Galliard, was able to do it full justice. Mrs. Montfort lent an attentive ear, resolving inwardly to question her absent husband regarding this lady, who, according to Mrs. Finn, was at Mawdry when Sir Hilary was brought home by the Thrope equipage, but of whom he had said no single word.

They were still clucking over the story, still following amid the crowd the dark head and the male head bending near it, when voices addressed them. The ladies, starting, looked round and up. Mr. Galliard and Sabina stood before them; she in white, with ear-rings jiggling at her neck, he in the bluest coat the room could boast, with the shiniest buttons, his legs concealed to the feet in nankin trousers, which he surveyed with pride.

"What?" Mrs. Finn exclaimed. "Is the set finished, then?"

"These five minutes," returned Mr. Galliard. "Have you been so deep in scandal that you did not observe it? I return," he went on, with his simper, "your enchanting charge—only for a time, she is only lent you. At the next quadrille I come again to claim her."

He bowed and strayed off in Mrs. Dest's direction.

"Why does he dress so strangely?" Mrs. Finn wondered. "Those extravagant pantaloons! All the other gentlemen are in stockings."

"They are the rage, Mamma," Sabina corrected her, with a touch of resentment, "the newest thing; but all the old slow-coaches are not yet caught up with the fashion. He was turned away, he says, from Willis's the other night, for wearing them."

"Very properly, in my opinion," said Mrs. Montfort, entering the fray. "This is very far from being my notion of how a gentleman should be clad."

"You prefer, perhaps," said Sabina, with a sneering glance, "an old tarnished uniform, with a great piece of the braid worn off the sleeve?"

This statement had its intended double effect of reminding Mrs. Montfort and humbling her. Remembering with vividness her brother's taunt, that the ladies at Mawdry would have brokers' men for partners, she started up.

"Where is Melian, Miss Finn? She should have returned to me. Was she not standing near you?"

"If she was," Sabina retorted, "she had no eyes for me." And she added, tossing her head to make the earrings swing: "Nor I for her, for that matter."

"No, very true," said Mrs. Finn with her customary placid bluntness. "You were too busy ogling Jefferey to pay any attention to your friend. But she will be safe enough, Mrs. Montfort. Sir Hilary's guests have been chosen, you know. She cannot find herself in bad company in his house."

"You pay me a delightful compliment, madam," said a voice.

They rose and curtsied. Sir Hilary stood beside them, smiling, and looking as agreeable as though bills and rebellious tenants had never existed. His black coat sat perfectly upon his shoulders, an effect that Mr. Galliard had harassed the tailor one full week to achieve. He looked younger; the grey in his hair was gilded by candlelight. The fluttered ladies regarded him, all three, with the frankest admiration, but with different sensations. Sabina hoped to be asked to dance; her mother's hope echoed Sabina's; Mrs. Montfort told herself that here was Melian's opportunity, but where, where was Melian?

"Mrs. Montfort," Sir Hilary addressed her, "I am seeking your niece. The dance being ended, I thought to find her by your side. Is she not come yet?"

He looked with inquiry at the sidling Sabina, whose hopes at once went high. Better to dance with Sir Hilary as proxy for another than not dance at all. But his intention was quite different.

"You were near her, Miss Finn. Can you not tell me what has become of Miss Forster?"

"I believe I can, sir," Sabina answered, disappointment lending an edge to her voice. "She is hiding away through there," she pointed, "in the hall somewhere, with that French gentleman in the old coat."

"I'll search there, then," replied Sir Hilary pleasantly, "for I shall not have leisure to dance much, my duties as host are pretty arduous, though delightful; but I should wish to stand up, for a little time at least, with my benefactress."

Sir Hilary bowed to all three ladies, and having thus excused himself from asking Sabina, made his way towards the door her finger had indicated. They saw, however, two of them with some satisfaction, that he was not easily to escape; hands caught his sleeve, fans beckoned him. He halted at last in a perfect tangle of good-will.

"It is really a great pity," said Mrs. Finn to the unhappy aunt, "a great pity for Miss Melian to throw herself away so. I assure you she looked to be completely in love with that Frenchman; and they are very talkative, you know, as a nation, and good at love-making, and dancing, and all that sort of thing. I dare say, though Sir Hilary does find her, she would not give a pin to dance with him."

II

When the dance had ended, with a slackening and slowing of the tune, Melian's partner, taking her hand within his arm, and using his shoulders to make a way for them, led her through the crowd, and out at the door leading to the hall. From habit she protested a little.

"But my aunt expects me. My aunt will be waiting."

He answered, with a pressure of his arm:

"I have waited longer."

She sighed for the memory of the tryst she had broken, and dissented no more. They crossed the hall, still shadowy, for all its candles. The dark old panelling drew in the light, absorbed it; and save for the candles themselves, and the white ovals of the portraits' faces, the great vaulted place remained subdued and gloomy. De Lannion led her through it and up the stairs, past the portrait of Sir Hilary set in the panels, looking, in its black coat, not too unlike his present self for flattery, and into a small alcove, a recess within the thickness of the outer wall of the old house, which so far had remained undiscovered by the guests. There, alone with him as she had dreamed of being, had longed to be, shyness overcame her completely. She stood, eyes downcast, plucking at the silver braiding upon her skirt. The place was unlighted save by a faint glow from the hall and the white winter moon. She heard his voice; his hand came down to seek hers and held it. The movement she could answer. She turned her wrist so that palm met palm.

"I am happy," he was saying, "Melian, so happy."

She broke out in excuses, not daring to give her own happiness words:

"You know, on Saturday, I could not come. My uncle kept me, and my father. Oh, I was wretched, but I could not get away. Indeed I would not have let anything keep me——"

"Ah, what matter?" he interrupted softly. "You did not come, that is over. Now, you are here."

"You might have thought," she began, but could not end.

"I might have thought you did not care for me?" She bowed her head. "How could I think that?"

The head was lifted in a gesture, the remains of pride.

"Were you so sure, then?"

"That you loved?" said he, very simply. "Yes, I was sure. Did you not tell me so? How else should I have ridden home that day thanking God?"

"You have thanked God before, perhaps."

"No," he answered; then with an imploring movement: "Ah, do not look back, my heart. This is happiness, that is between us. Will you not understand it so?"

"Is it?" she asked him; asked her own perplexity, her beating heart, the unknown tremendous trouble of her whole body and mind. He would not answer, but drew her close to him, holding her lightly against him. Her hand, pressed against his lapel, could feel the heart beneath it thudding like her own.

III

As they stood together in the half-darkness, noises came to their ears from the hall: the banging of the great door, shouts, a kind of tumult. Suddenly she started away from him, stiffly listening. He whispered to her something, hands seeking hers once more. She

caught them, clung to them, but listened still. The ugly sound of one man's angry voice came from below. The words she could not hear, but she knew who spoke them. He felt her shiver, and gently besought her.

"That sound," she said, not moving, "who is there, down in the hall?"

She felt his shoulders lift in a shrug.

"Some drunken fellow. What does he matter to us?"

She made a sound, like a moan, that startled him. He caught and strongly held her, unresponsive, her whole self listening.

"Are you frightened, my dear? It is nothing. I'll go and see, go and quiet them."

She put him aside, both hands against his breast.

"Not you; it is I who must go."

She went towards the curtained doorway. He knew rather than saw that there she turned and held a hand to him, imploring. He took it in both his; and thus, she gently leading him, they came out on to the gallery that headed the stairs.

In the hall, his back against the main door, Horatio Forster stood. He was strangely dressed, a mixture of punctilio and disarray. Over his evening clothes and fine shirt his old stained driving-coat was thrown; his hands gripped something in each wide-flapped pocket, and he leant heavily upon the door behind him, one foot well forward, propping him upright. He faced a number of men in livery, and one or two curious couples paused on their way back to the ballroom to wonder at him. The music of the next dance was just beginning. Forster was very drunk; he talked incessantly, stumbling over words, gesturing with heavy, sudden jerks of the head.

"Get out of my way," he was ordering the footmen. "D'you know who I am? No, you don't. Nor does he, didn't know who I was in Pliny. Where is he? Where's the dog hiding? And the bitch, too——"

One of the inquisitive ladies gave a faint scream, and was hurried away by her partner. The other showed some inclination to stay and watch the scene develop; but Major Pardie, who squired her, enforced a military right-wheel, which obliged her to follow in the former couple's wake. The two gentlemen, over their partner's heads, exchanged significant nods as they escorted their partners out of harm's way. The footmen, nonplussed for lack of a leader, drew nearer. Forster checked them instantly.

"No further! No hands on me! I'm a magistrate, I've as good a right as he has—better, a better right——"

The two gentlemen, having seen their partners safe among the matrons, were returning, hastily concerting a plan between them. Pardie, coming forward, spoke civilly to the intruder.

"What do you want, sir? Will you not come with me to some more convenient place?"

"Who're you?" Forster asked him, staring.

"A guest in this house," Pardie answered, "as you are, too, sir, I believe. Do me the favour——"

"Guest!" Forster interrupted. "Guest, that's good. Guest, are you? Well, I'm host. This house is mine, and all these fellows in sky-blue, too. All mine, and you're my guest, sir. Delighted to see you, though I don't know your damned name, nor care. And he doesn't know mine. Doesn't know mine, there's a fool for you! Where is he—Pomfret? I'll see him, I'm master here.

I'm the owner of this house. Paid cash for it. I'm a tradesman. Don't care for me, sir, get back to your partner. Delighted to see you here, in my house. Don't keep a lady waiting."

"I think," said the other gentleman, summoning his friend with his eye, and making a covert sign, a gentle tapping of the temple, "I think, Pardie, this person will do better outside."

They came at him together, suddenly rushing; but within a pace of him, paused. Forster's hands were no longer in his pockets, a pistol stood at each man's heart, and his thumbs were upon the hammers.

"I don't think so," said he, chuckling. "I don't think that will do."

His voice was growing more indistinct, as though warmth had set the poison quickening with the course of his blood. But his hands were steady.

"So you'd better take care, d'you hear? No tricks on me. I shot two Ludds once, and they died. Congrat—congratulated on my salutary example. That's what they said to me, the justices. So you'd better get out of my way. Tell Pomfret I'm here. I've got something to say to him."

The gentlemen, again consulting with a look, withdrew from the pistols, and the one who had tapped his temple said:

"By all means, sir. We'll inform Sir Hilary. But will you not come to some quieter place?"

Forster saw the move and countered it cunningly, wagging his head.

"No, you don't," said he, "you don't get behind me, you Satans. Fetch that baronet; fetch him, I say, don't keep me waiting, or I'll put a bullet somewhere——"

They retreated. Hastily, whispering under Forster's cloudy mocking eye, a further plan of campaign was formed. Two footmen went towards the ballroom. One guarded the door, that no person might come unbidden into danger; the other passed through, going in search of Sir Hilary. In the gallery Melian struggled against De Lannion's retaining hand.

"Let me go!" she urged him, "he may listen to me. Oh, it is my fault, my fault. I must go to him. Let me go down!"

"No," he answered quietly, "stay here and I will go, if you would like. But it is best to leave him."

"You!" She gave a wild, short laugh. "He'd kill you. He hates you. He is armed."

"A drunken man's aim——" said De Lannion lightly, moving to go.

"No!" she insisted, and held him with a strength that she had never known her arms to possess. They stood in a strange embrace that locked closer with the will and effort of each to be free. Forster heard, perhaps. He ceased to chuckle at his foe's discomfiture, and looked up towards the stairs. They saw him grow rigid, and glare; then bow, the pistols still held before him. But his eyes were not upon his daughter and her lover; they were turned towards the empty curve of the stairs, where no one walked. He spoke:

"At last! A good evening to you. Hell to you! Come at last, have you? Down, then, come down; don't keep me shouting."

There was a pause; music and the rhythm of feet came from the ballroom. Forster's attitude did not change.

"Afraid, are you? What is it you don't like? These,

eh?" A lift of the pistols. "They're for self-defence. A gentleman must defend himself. Come down—you gentleman. I've something to say."

Melian stretched out her arms beyond her lover's shoulders, and cried to the drunkard, raving at a painted enemy smiling out from his frame:

"Father!"

He seemed not to hear the word; but as though, somehow, he had apprehended it, he went on:

"Where's my daughter, Pomfret? Is my daughter here? You think you're clever with women. You took the other—the other"—he hiccupped, made a retching effort or two, and spat—"you can keep her. That for her! Good enough for you; leavings, muck. I've done with her, you're welcome. Eh? Say thank you. Where's your manners, baronet, blast your soul?"

Melian could do no more, but hid her face, not to look on her father's humiliation. Above the music his thick voice continued to upbraid, while he lurched forward to the stair foot.

"Can't you answer? You there, I'm talking to you. I'm talking civilly, aren't I? Very well, then. If I'm talking civilly, you've a right to answer. Answer, can't you? Come down. You're afraid. Baronet's afraid. Or too proud, that's it, that's better. Too proud to talk to a tradesman. I'll get angry soon, d'you hear me, unless you move. Count twenty, first, good old rule; then I'll get angry. Listen! One—two—three—four—five——"

There was a consultation, very hurried and inconclusive, between the gentlemen.

"Can we rush him?"

"Wait awhile. Dangerous yet. His hand's steady enough, though he's far gone."

"My God, who'd have expected a madman? I can't stand this."

"Wait. Don't move yet."

The counting voice staggered on, the unsteady feet attained the stairway.

"Thirteen—fifteen. Make up your mind. I'll give you no grace beyond twenty. Sixteen, seventeen—are you coming? No scamandering, then. What, no? Eighteen—I've warned you, haven't I?—nineteen——"

The next instant was a very confusion of noise; an explosion, the crack of a bullet against the panels, a scream, oaths; with these a drift of music coming through the ballroom's opening door. Dead silence succeeded; then came a voice from the doorway in calm inquiry: a thin, sure voice, impossible to mistake.

"What's this? What's doing here?"

Forster wheeled, gasping, his right arm with the smoking pistol in its hand flung about the newel-post for support. Sir Hilary stood against the dark old door as in a frame, dressed in black like the Sir Hilary of the portrait, whose forehead now was split and gaping. He surveyed Forster, but spoke no word, only stood still, his hand upon the knob. Forster let the pistol fall, and shutting his eyes, waited a moment till the vision should be gone; then he blinked and shook his head, and once more looked. Sir Hilary did not move. Forster's hand made a strange motion, as if to rip one of the shining buttons from his waistcoat, but it could not achieve the movement. Up it came, shaking, held out in front of him, the fingers splayed to ward off horror. He turned away his head, and his eyes found the other enemy waiting, still upright, with his forehead torn open. The long hall, for all its height, was no more than a corridor,

whose either end a phantom guarded. He glared right, left, clinging to the wooden pillar; there was no way past these.

"No use," said he thickly, through chattering teeth, "no silver bullet——"

Without warning Sir Hilary made a step forward. As if in answer, Forster threw up his left hand, pointing the second pistol at his heart. Not speaking, unhurried, Sir Hilary advanced. Forster threw his right arm across his eyes, screaming:

"Keep away! He's coming for me. Dead, and coming for me, with a hole in his forehead, walking, walking——"

As though some strength unseen drew it down, the arm was lowered, and above it his eyes appeared, bloodshot, horrible with fear. Living Sir Hilary came on, while he of the torn forehead waited and smiled, unmoving.

Forster struggled to run, but his feet slid upon the shining stairs. He swayed, and hung half upright by an arm, his knees failing. Between the two enemies, one moving, the other still, and both silent, there was no way. Despair broke from his clenched throat in a cry:

"Christ! I'll cheat you!"

The left hand bent suddenly inwards. This time only two sounds were heard, the crack of a shot, a dull and confused noise of falling. Sir Hilary, continuing his leisurely progress, stood at last above the body, and looking down into the ruined welling face, asked of those who stood by:

"But who is this?"

No one could answer him. The music was ceasing, and there came from the gallery a low sound of weeping.

THE END



